

Invenzione e Fantasia: The (Re)Birth of Imagination in Renaissance Art

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Introduction

The notion of imagination is central to our contemporary western conception of and valuing of art. Yet, historically its centrality has been the product of a gradual development. In this paper I examine one particularly important moment in this development, i.e., the Renaissance in Italy. By examining the changes in the nature, practice, and conception of art during this period, I hope to probe the changing assumptions about the connection between imagination and art.

Posing the Problem

Our contemporary western valuing of imagination in art rests on certain assumptions about art-making and about persons. Imagination seems to refer to the conjuring up of what is not present, the creation of an idea or artifact from the mind of the creator. That a work of art arises from the imagination of an artist is thus taken to mean that the work is a reflection of the person's individuality, an authentic product of the artist's inner being. As such it will be marked by originality. External constraints are thought to be detrimental to the artist's imagination, inhibiting free self-expression.

In the Middle Ages and early Renaissance, these assumptions did not play significant role. Art was not seen as the manifestation of something within the artist. Rather, artistic activity had to do with the making of purely functional artifacts. Painters and sculptors were viewed as craftsmen whose skill was acquired by apprenticeship to a

master and immersion in the tradition. Individuality was not a significant consideration. All artisans were members of guilds and the creation of art was usually a collective process and more often than not anonymous. Nor were art works seen as the manifestation of individual self-expression. Rather, art was made in response to the demands of patrons, who also determined the specific content and imagery. Art-making was not about individuality, originality, freedom or self-expression.

During the course of the Renaissance, the arts underwent a dramatic transformation. Medieval art involved highly conventionalized portrayals of Christian archetypes using accepted religious symbols and iconography, depicted on a flattened plane with little attempt at naturalism. Physically accurate depiction was not valued and was not the goal. Painting was, rather, focused on formal idealization and spiritual meaning.

The Renaissance saw a fundamental change in the nature of artistic representation, toward an astonishing naturalism which allowed for unprecedented expressive possibilities. Concurrent with these changes in the content of the visual arts, there emerged an altered conception of artistic activity and a new role for the painter (sculptor or architect) — that of artist. Art-making was elevated from its previous position as manual labour and granted new respect and prestige. Individual artists were becoming recognized and sought after, and were granted more autonomy. And terms like ‘invention’, ‘imagination’, and ‘genius’ were starting to be applied to their work. This tendency reached its culmination with the art historian (and artist) Vasari’s virtual deification of several contemporaneous artists including Brunelleschi, Leonardo and Michelangelo (whom he calls “divine” (Vasari, p. 325).

Why did the nature and practice of the arts change in this significant way during this time period? And how and why did the conception of the artist and his work change as well?

The popular answer to these questions is that the era was blessed with a few geniuses, individuals of extraordinary talent, creativity and insight who effected these changes through the power of their imagination, a view preshadowed by Vasari's' views.

I shall argue, however, that the situation is much more complex than this description would imply. There was, in fact, a great variety of factors involved in these changes in the arts, factors interconnected in a complex web of relationships. Rather than seeing imagination as a specifiable faculty which suddenly flourished during the Renaissance and which enabled certain individuals to effect radical changes, it might be more accurate to think of the concept of imagination and related concepts such as invention and genius as constructed and transformed in the process of these changes. Nevertheless, the meaning of and assumptions behind these terms were still quite distant from how we tend to understand these concepts today.

Factors

The factors contributing to the transformation of the arts were numerous and various, but may be broadly categorized into contextual (political and economic), intellectual, artistic, and social.

i) Contextual

The economic boom in the various Italian city-states (most notably Florence in the 15th century) generated considerable wealth that could be spent on art and a well-

educated and cultured elite to support its production. And the concentration of artistic talent attracted by the activity and innovation created a climate which promoted excellence and a unity of artistic criteria.

The new commercial activities and capitalist aspirations of the city-states also promoted pragmatist and materialist attitudes which drew people from the exclusively spiritual focus of Medieval society toward more worldly interests. The resulting attempt to adapt and to reconcile old and new values resulted in a turning to antiquity, a move which “changed the intellectual and artistic landscape”. Moreover, the new emphasis on the individual profoundly influenced how the artist came to be viewed.

ii) Intellectual/philosophical

One of the most important developments of the Renaissance was the emergence of humanism which focused on antiquity and a rediscovery of the thought and achievements of ancient Greece and Rome. It did not refer to the non-divine. This was a philosophy and a culture still very much rooted in Christianity. Rather, the humanist scholars looked to the ancients for models for living and ways to reconcile Christian values with the changing conditions and the new ideas that were rapidly proliferating. Humanist scholarship focused on the liberal arts. One of the struggles for artists in the course of the Renaissance was to have art activity recognized as having a place among the humanities rather than being seen simply as manual labour.

In terms of philosophical views, humanist scholarship placed a new emphasis on “man and his dignity” (Kris teller 1964, 1980, 1990 p. 16). A particularly striking statement of this perspective is presented in Pico della Mirandola’s *Oration* on the dignity of man in which he has God address Adam as follows:

Thou, constrained by no limits, in accordance with thine own free will, in whose hand We have placed thee shalt ordain for thyself the limits of thy nature (cited in Taylor, 1989, p. 200).

This statement offers a very different view of the place of human beings in the cosmos than that embedded in the Medieval Christian worldview, appearing to indicate some notion of free will. Yet it is important to recognize that the idea of freedom is still understood within the context of a fixed hierarchical cosmic order. Taylor explains that “Man’s ends are still set by a cosmically realized order of good” (Taylor, 1987, p. 200).

The new freedom allotted to human beings in much Renaissance scholarship also emphasized a role for man in completing God’s creation, providing both a justification for the arts and a sanction for artistic innovation. This new recognition of human productive powers was, however, limited in scope and still quite distant from contemporary notions of human agency in creating.

A central aspect of the rediscovery of antiquity was archeological. Attention was suddenly paid to the incredible wealth of physical artifacts from antiquity, artifacts which had been ignored during the Middle Ages because they were seen as remnants of paganism and therefore to be despised rather than admired. Classical works began to be copied and studied, resulting in the rediscovery of many principles and rules of art and architecture, and the role played by this rediscovery in Renaissance art cannot be overestimated.

The overcoming of the Medieval disdain for appearances made possible a new respect for nature and observation which fostered a growth of the empirical sciences. And developments in mathematics, anatomy, optics, geometry, mechanics, and light and

colour theory had a profound influence on the arts, contributing to the (re)invention of perspective, the understanding of proportion, the ability to portray the human body, and advances in architecture. But equally important, the visual arts were beginning to be understood as a way of understanding the world. This was still very far, however, from a contemporary empiricist perspective. Idealization and the attempt to find the reality underlying appearances were still very much in evidence.

iii) Artistic

a) technical innovations

The preceding factors provided the context for dramatic changes in how the arts were practised. The most important of these was doubtless the growing concern for and achievements in naturalism. Overcoming the disregard and even disdain for physical appearances of the Middle Ages, the Renaissance saw the emergence of a new goal (or rather, the rediscovery of an ancient goal) for painting -- mimesis or imitation.

Such striking achievements in naturalism were made possible by numerous scientific and technical advances. One of these was the invention of oil paint which allowed for a greater vivacity of colour and greater ease in blending colours, making possible the layering of paint which created many of the expressive effects characteristic of Renaissance painting.

One of the most pivotal innovations was the discovery (or rediscovery) of linear perspective, which allowed the creation of spatial illusion and made naturalistic expression possible. It was also significant in terms of how it changed the relationship between observer and art object, having the effect of both objectifying vision by putting distance between subject and object (Kristeller), and subjectifying vision in that the artist is imposing a personal point of view on the space (Taylor). This seems to indicate a new degree of self-consciousness on the part of the artist. Several theorists have pointed out, however, that linear perspective was developed partly for reasons other than naturalistic portrayal and was not used consistently or exclusively even after its development (Turner; Welch, 1997).

Another area of science which had significant implications for the visual arts was anatomy. Vastly increased understanding of the anatomical makeup of living organisms contributed greatly to the ability to accurately portray the human form in painting and in sculpture, and it was sometimes artists themselves (Leonardo, for example) who conducted such investigations.

What turned this series of innovations into an artistic revolution was likely dissemination. Artists often travelled amongst various city-states and courts (and sometimes foreign countries), picking up new ideas and techniques and spreading them to other artists. The proliferation of prints and engravings also served to make the works of artists more widely available and to disseminate new techniques.

b) training

In the early Renaissance, those individuals wanting to be artists would have had some basic education in literacy and numeracy but would generally not have been schooled in Latin or the humanities. The majority of their artistic training took place in a workshop setting through apprenticeship to a master. The training was extremely rigorous and took the form of copying master works, models, and ancient pieces as well as rendering live models. The emphasis was on the mastery of technique, not on originality. As the Renaissance progressed, the demands on artists-in-training gradually became more intellectually challenging and the curriculum enlarged to include more intellectual concerns, for example grammar, geometry, arithmetic, anatomy, perspective and theoretical design.

iv) Social

With the changes in the nature and practice of the visual arts, artists became increasingly dissatisfied with their status as manual labourers and sought to increase the prestige of their work as well as to advance their own social status and income. Their efforts focused on gaining recognition for the intellectual aspects of their work and having the visual arts included among the liberal arts (Ames-Lewis, 2000).

One aspect was the increasing participation of artists in intellectual activities such as archeological investigation, poetry, writing treatises about art, and participating in debates about the relative merits of painting, sculpture, and poetry. Changes in the training of artists to include the liberal arts also reflected these changes in the status of the artist.

Artists also took more direct measures to increase their social status and income. They took on court and civic duties, acquired (sometimes bought) titles, purchased fine houses, started wearing elegant dress, and formed their own art collections – in other words took on the life style of a courtier. They also used self-portraiture as a means to assert in visual form their artistic and intellectual skills, beginning to portray themselves as confident gentlemen with fine clothes and visible signs of wealth and status. Artists also began to engage in a form of advertising, producing some work whose primary purpose was to display their skills, techniques and erudition.

One of the leading figures in the art of self-promotion was the artist and art critic Giorgio Vasari, whose *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* has been an important source of information about the artists of the Renaissance. Vasari had his own theory of art-historical development which saw incremental progress throughout

the Renaissance culminating in achievements which rivalled or surpassed those of ancient Greece and Rome. In the *Lives* he was interested in pointing out artistic and/or moral lessons according to his theory. Leonardo held a pivotal place in Vasari's theory and he saw Michelangelo as achieving the height of perfection. Thus his extravagant praise for these two artists as divine geniuses served his rhetorical goals in corroborating his theory (Turner 1992). Although his accounts were largely based on fact, historical accuracy was not his main concern, and he invented stories to suit his purposes. Indeed, Turner talks of Vasari as 'inventing' Leonardo. It was the writings of Vasari which were principally responsible for the construction of Leonardo and Michelangelo as creative geniuses, an ascription which was taken up in subsequent writing.

The changes in the nature and practice of the arts were also accompanied by a transformation in the relationship between artist and patron. Early in the Renaissance, it was patrons, along with their humanist advisors, who decided on the themes (*invenzione*) and details of paintings, a choice which was considered very important as artworks were steeped in classical allusions and were generally allegorical, suggesting certain moral lessons.

As their status as intellectuals grew, artists began to seek the right to decide on their own *invenzione*, and, after some struggles, patrons were beginning to grant artists some leeway for creative invention. Certain artists were gaining substantial reputations and were sought after in competition among patrons.

Invenzione, Fantasia and Ingegno

These changes in how artists were viewed were reflected in the kinds of terms used to describe them and their work. In the fourteenth century, the focus was not on imagination, but over the course of the Renaissance, the terms *fantasia* (imagination), *invenzione* (invention), and *ingegno* (genius) were used with increasing frequency, both by artists themselves and by humanist commentators. These ascriptions were part and parcel of the growing recognition of artists' inventive powers and their right to creative input into their work. Nonetheless Kemp cautions against imposing essentially modern notions of artistic creativity on that period. Rather, we must analyse these terms in view of what they meant at the time and in relation to each other (Kemp, 1977).

One of the differences which Kemp points out is that the term *invenzione* was used in two different senses during the Renaissance. One sense, associated with the discovery of truth, saw *invenzione* as a rational process which involves finding principles which are in harmony with nature. Renaissance thinkers believed that there was a unity between the imitation of antiquity, the laws of nature, and the artist's originality in invention, a point of view which is unthinkable in post Romantic ideas of creativity.

The second sense of *invenzione*, emanating from the literary-poetic tradition, refers to the power of inventing new things and is associated with inspiration. *Invenzione* in this sense was attributed to poets but was denied to visual artists for much of the fifteenth century. When it was finally applied to visual artists, its scope was quite limited, referring not to form, which was seen as an aspect of design or composition, but only to content, that is coming up with the subjects for painting,

The term *ingegno* or genius was applied occasionally by artists to a few extraordinary individuals, but it tended to refer simply to innate brilliance rather than to

the complex of meanings associated with the term today. Moreover, *ingegno* must be subject to constraint and discipline. Alberti, for example, claimed that genius was not enough for artistic achievement and that one also required knowledge, diligence and persistence (Kemp, 1977). And although the attribution of genius was made from time to time by artists, humanists still tended to resist attributing *ingegnium* to painters. A notable exception was Carlo Marsupinni's epitaph for Brunelleschi in which he refers to the architect as *divino ingenio*, a divine genius (King).

References to imagination (*fantasia*), which is connected to the capacity to form images, were still rare before 1450 and painters were generally not credited with "advanced powers of imaginative individuality" (Kemp, 1977, p. 365). Imagination was sometimes seen as an extension of rational thought. A notable exception, however, was Francesco Colonna's characterization of imagination as a transcendental power of the mind separate from rational thought, an idea which was "altogether new in Renaissance writing on the arts" (Kemp, 1977, p. 365).

One of the most important artists to stress the quasi-divine nature of human imagination and creative power was Leonardo. He held that man's creating is like God's in a sense, but that it operates in its own manner and at a different level of the microcosm, using God's creations as the raw material for his own.

Whatever the differences in the uses of the terms, however, it does seem clear that at least some artists and thinkers "began to establish that imaginative procedures, whether credited to *fantasia*, *imaginativa* or *cogitativa* assumed a vital role in artistic invention" (Kemp, 1977, p. 396). Nonetheless, these Renaissance ideas were still a fair distance from contemporary notions of originality, creative freedom, and authentic self-

expression. Indeed, Kemp points out that the verb used for artistic production was not *creare* (to create) but rather *fare* (to make), “which could be applied as readily to pasta as painting” (Kemp, 1977, p. 397).

Imagination and Art

The preceding examination serves to demonstrate the changes that took place during the Renaissance with respect to the role of individuality, originality, freedom and self-expression in art. Artists enjoyed increased autonomy in the practice of their art and increased freedom for creative input. Individual artists began to be recognized and their work valued and sought after. Artists and their work began to be thought about in terms of invention, imagination and genius. And astonishing advances in naturalism opened up unprecedented expressive possibilities and allowed for the creation of works which we still today deem highly imaginative.

Nonetheless, it appears that the way of looking at imagination and its role in art was still some distance from our modern conception. This is not surprising given a worldview that, although in transition, was still fundamentally different from our own. Indeed, Welsh (1977) argues that the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were periods of remarkable continuity as well as tremendous transition, and Turner (1997) cautions us not to overestimate the modernity of the Renaissance.

One area in which this difference can be seen is with respect to the idea of originality. Originality was not what was primarily at issue in Renaissance art. So many of the innovations were, in fact, rediscoveries from antiquity, and this was seen not as a problematic lack of originality but rather as desirable. And the principle method of

training and working was through copying and imitation, including copying from model books and from the works of other artists.

The continuity that was evident in Renaissance art was not only from classical antecedents, however, but also came through Medieval art. Welch (1997), for example, in comparing a fourteenth and a fifteenth century chapel in Santa Maria Novella, points out that, despite their stylistic differences, they were built to serve the same purposes, were commissioned by the same family of patrons who in both cases specified the details of the work, used the same techniques, and told the same Christian stories.

The contemporary sense of artistic imagination as conjuring up something new from artist's inner being is likewise absent from Renaissance art theory. The goal of art was not individual creativity but rather *mimesis* or imitation. Artists were not trying to generate possibilities or to conjure up something new. Rather, their goal was to capture reality, both in terms of representing appearances and in terms of mirroring the hierarchical moral order of the world. And, although there was a growing recognition of individuality of style, it was still generally distrusted. Alberti, for example, regarded it as "a limitation to be overcome by the universal artist rather than as a welcome expression of individuality" (Kemp, 1977, p. 390). Similarly, Leonardo states: "the idiosyncrasies of individual judgment must be overridden by absolute standards derived from a rigorous investigation of natural law" (Kemp, 1977, pp. 390-391).

Renaissance art was built upon several fundamental ideas: 1) that *mimesis* of nature was of paramount importance, 2) that art required rational knowledge, and 3) that antiquity provided the best possible guide for achieving these ends. Invention and imagination were never to override these basic principles of art (Kemp, 1977, p. 396).

Although the Renaissance did see an increase in the autonomy of artists over their work, it was never complete freedom in the sense which is seen as desirable in the contemporary art context. The idea of free will which was being developed philosophically was, as we have seen, a limited one, and the artistic and social constraints on the artist were still considerable. The extent of artistic license was still severely constrained, and most works were still done for commissions.

Despite the fact that contemporary notions of artworks as unconstrained products of the artist's imagination or authentic expressions of the artist's inner being are not applicable to Renaissance art, nevertheless we deem a very large number of the works produced during this period to be highly imaginative, some even exemplars of imaginative portrayal. This is due, to a large extent, to the advances in naturalism which allowed for unprecedented expressiveness in the works. Thus the imaginativeness of the works was connected with a series of contextual, intellectual, artistic and social factors, many of which were external to the artist. The idea that art changed as a result of the extraordinary imagination of a few creative geniuses is highly problematic. Rather, the very idea of creative genius seems to have been largely a construction by writers such as Vasari and others who followed his lead to promote certain views about the arts.

This is not at all to deny that some (indeed many) of the artists of the Renaissance were extraordinarily talented, dedicated and far-sighted individuals who wrought significant changes in their art and achieved work of unsurpassing beauty and expressive power. But a better way to think about what these individuals possessed might be in terms of a combination of abilities and traits, fueled by a rich and extensive repertoire of

knowledge and developed through rigorous training, which interacted with contextual, intellectual, artistic and social factors, to produce innovative and imaginative work.

What this analysis does seem to indicate, however, is that our modern assumptions about imagination centred on individuality, originality, freedom and self-expression are not necessary in thinking about the production of imaginative works. This might suggest that contemporary efforts to foster imagination which focus exclusively on these aspects are misplaced. Producing imaginative work, whatever else it may involve, seems to be connected to a profound interaction or conversation with the relevant artistic and cultural traditions and to a real mastery of the cultural tools. These must play a central role in education for artistic imagination.

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