



THE HISTORY OF NORTHERN RENAISSANCE ART

Seminar Leader: **Tamara Garcia**

House Leader: **Saki Ota**

Course Description

Like the Italian Renaissance, art of the Northern European Renaissance was largely based on religion and fantasy. Using the newly-developed oil medium, the Northern masters were able to depict (to represent by using images) figures realistically, drawing similarities between the artist and the creator, God himself. A century later during the Protestant Reformation, such images were criticized as objects of religious veneration (worship) that was prohibited in the Bible. Furthermore, through the development of woodblock prints and engravings (a printing technique), the teachings of the Reformers were quickly spread across the continent. Towards the end of the century, such teachings resulted in less sacred iconography (symbols) in paintings, and a shift toward landscape and portraiture with a moral message.

In this seminar, we will look at such pieces, and analyze their role in society, whether for private or public veneration. Next, we will explore the differences between design and art: How did art at this time communicate the word of the Catholic church, and later spread the teachings of the Reformers? How did the artists relate to this transition? We will show how many of the elements used by these Renaissance masters have been used by artists and designers today.

Schedule

Day 1: *What is art? Art as a tool of religion, and how medium reflects subject*

Before we dive into the wonderful world of the Northern Renaissance, we first ask the question, "What is art?" We will share our ideas, and then look at some works of art from the Northern Renaissance to reflect on these ideas.

After a quick review of Christianity and Biblical themes, we will travel back in time to Europe in the early 1400s. What was life like back then? We discover that visual storytelling was important because not many people could read, or they were illiterate. We also realize that the Catholic Church was very important in people's daily lives. But many people were angry and complained about the fact that the church sold indulgences (exchanging forgiveness for money).

Once we understand this rich context, we ask, "What was art like during the Northern Renaissance?" What kind of stories were told, and how were they told? We look at illuminated manuscripts (elaborately illustrated texts) which taught lessons from the Bible, and find that art often told religious stories. We then look at sculptures and paintings, and the competition between these two ways that artists told Biblical stories.



Artists & Works Explored:

- *Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry* by the Limbourg Brothers, a great example of Gothic illuminated manuscript
- *Altar of the Crucifixion* by Melchior Broederlam, painter, and Jacques de Baerze, sculptor
- *Well of Moses & Tomb of Philip II the Bold* by Claus Sluter, prominent sculptor
- *Arnolfini Portrait* by Jan van Eyck, developer of oil paints and the pioneer of the Northern style, first of the three great Early Flemish painters
- *The Descent from the Cross* by Rogier Van der Weyden, second of the three great Early Flemish painters

Day 2: *What is the role of the artist? What is the role of the patron?*

We will open the second day of class with an introduction to *altarpieces*. Altarpieces were folding paintings that were often commissioned (the hiring and payment for the creation of a work of art) by churches or wealthy families. Because many of these pieces were commissioned, we must explore the role of the *artist* versus the *patron* (the person who buys the work) during the creation of the piece. Who had a bigger say in the subject matter? How did this reflect the placement of hidden, mysterious symbols with secret meanings within the painting? What was the difference between these three-panel altarpieces from single-paneled works?

Remembering the first lecture, we will also discuss what kind of person was able to view these paintings. Since there were no art museums in the 1400s, how did people see this artwork? Consider how social status could have related to this as well.

Artists & Works Explored:

- *Merode Altarpiece* by Robert Campin, the last of the three great Early Flemish painters
- *Portinari Altarpiece* by Hugo Van der Goes
- *Isenheim Altarpiece* by Matthias Grünewald
- *The Garden of Earthly Delights* by Hieronymous Bosch

Day 3: *How can social issues affect art? What is the difference between design and art?*

Seeing the Church abuse its power with the sale of indulgences (exchanging money for forgiveness) angered priest and scholar Martin Luther. After writing his Ninety-Five Theses with his complaints about the Catholic church, Martin Luther gained many followers. A new branch of Christianity was born: Lutheranism. Despite the fact that his interpretation of the Bible largely disapproved of artworks, Luther found great support within the artistic community. We will investigate the effect of his teaching on such artworks in class.

Next, we will discuss one of the most influential artists from the time, Albrecht Durer. Not only was he a painter and theorist, but he made a lasting effect in history with his



masterful carving and printmaking, marking the early days of design through mass production.

Artists & Works Explored:

- *The Law and the Gospel* and *Portrait of Martin Luther* by Lucas Cranach, Luther's friend who incorporated his teachings in his art.
- *Melencolia I* and *Self Portrait* by Albrecht Durer, a pioneer in the art of engravings and woodblock prints, which allowed for the mass distribution of art throughout Europe.
- *The French Ambassadors* by Hans Holbein the Younger, portrait painter to King Henry VIII of England.

Day 4: *How did the Reformation affect art? Landscapes & the Move To Secular (Nonreligious) Subject Matter*

After reviewing our previous lectures, we will dive into our final class, dealing with Albrecht Altdorfer and Pieter Bruegel the Elder, artists who painted mostly landscapes and secular (nonreligious) subject matter. Despite this move, we will investigate how these artists were able to include a moral message in these works.

Artists & Works Explored:

- *The Battle of Alexander at Issus* by Albrecht Altdorfer
- *Netherlandish Proverbs and Hunters in the Snow* by Pieter Bruegel the Elder

Final Exercise

Student will create art pieces using disguised symbolism as discussed in class. (Could be hand-drawn or painted, collage, photograph). Students will prepare an explanation of their work, its functionality, and their role as the artist, citing specific pieces reviewed in the class that they were inspired by.

Pre-Seminar Assignments and Readings

Pre-seminar:

Look at Jan Van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait*. Write down any observations and what you believe the piece is about. Be prepared to share your ideas in class!

Day 1:

Manuscript Illumination in Northern Europe

http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/manu/hd_manu.htm



Day 2:

Iconography in Northern Renaissance Art

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tiYmkMgBEck>

Day 3:

Overview of the Reformation

http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/tudors/reformation_overview_01.shtml

Other Resources

Guide to Christian Iconography

<http://www.christianiconography.info/>

Tour of Garden of Earthly Delights

<https://tuinderlusten-jheronimusbosch.ntr.nl/en>

Message from the House Leader

Hello everyone, I am Saki Ota studying Design at Goldsmiths, University of London. I used to study at the department of Science of design at Musashino Art University for two years, and now am studying in the UK, where I have been for the past two years. I have always liked to draw, paint and create art and design since childhood, but have not studied art history extensively. Currently I am interested in social innovation design, speculative design, and service design, but was inclined to do graphic design before. I am always trying to learn things which is connected to design, since I regard it as a perspective rather than a way of art and creation. As a student who studied both the aesthetic and functional aspects of design, I am always curious about what is the difference between art and design. Northern Renaissance Art is the significant period that art and design started to diverge, so I am glad to learn about it together with high school participants. Since I have taken a distinct path from what most people expect to follow after their high school graduation, I would be happy to help if you have any thoughts on the future. Since I study design and creativity, I hope our seminar will help you gain your interests on creative studies as well as art and its history as well. I am looking forward to seeing you soon!

Message from the Seminar Leader

Hello! I am incredibly grateful to have the opportunity to teach you all this summer. My name is Tamara, I am from Miami, Florida, and I am currently studying Politics and East Asian Studies at Brandeis University. I am sure you are wondering, why this topic for a seminar? In the grand scheme of things, this class will only cover a blip of time in a rather small area. Nevertheless, this period of time presented drastic changes, not only in the world of the arts but



Garcia and Ota

through visual propaganda, society as well. Through this class, not only do I hope that you will understand these artworks, but the context in which they were taken from.