Annibale Carracci and the Palazzo Farnese

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There are two basic challenges which are ever-present to the artist. The first is to transform a blank empty ground into an illusionistic representation of reality by incorporating light and space. The second challenge is to maintain a unique signature style while combining former artistic discoveries with the artist’s own imagination and ingenuity.

Beginning around the turn of the 17th century, the world of art began to change dramatically. Weary of the once innovative ideals of the Early Renaissance, artists had already reached the pinnacle of their experimental ideas in the High Renaissance. Mannerism, with its stretched proportions and neglect of the laws of space, was discarded by forward-thinking artists with the exception of borrowing the exaggeration in movement from the forms it produced. Artists were anxious for something new and innovative, a style that would surpass in aesthetics those preceding it. With the Baroque period, arose a new style which mastered the epiphany of illusion.

Illusion has played a critical part in the world of representational art since virtually the beginning of artistic existence. In the caves of Lascaux, prehistoric paintings depicting bulls were painted onto natural rock reliefs in order to appear three-dimensional. Ancient Roman architects compensated for the optical illusion of a sinking structure in such a massive building as the Parthenon by creating tapered columns and a slightly bowed base. Other more recent, yet still ancient examples, can be found in the perspective paintings decorating the villas of Pompeii, Boscoreale and Herculaneum prior to the invention of linear perspective. These ruins discovered only within the past century are rare examples of an early attempt towards perspective. They were not even available to the artists of the Renaissance and Baroque, yet with their interest in Humanism and Neo-Platonism, they illustrated selections from classical literature.

Although illusionistic space seemed of little importance compared to symbolic iconography during the Middle Ages, its popularity reappeared at the start of the Renaissance. Neo-Platonic thought reigned in art and literature. During an age of break-through science and technology, artists of the succeeding Baroque age became ever more interested in the macroscopic spaces of the celestial world. The ceiling of the Palazzo Farnese is the perfect example of the Baroque period, with its dramatically curving, Michelangelo-inspired figures, and expertly crafted three-dimensional illusions. Neo-Platonic ideals seem to resonate from within the frescos throughout the vault.

From the Bolognese academy, the first significant academy of its kind in the history of western art, arose some of the earliest of Baroque masters: the Carracci.1 The premise of this academy was that the basis of any academic philosophy of art could be taught. The materials of instruction must be the traditions, the antique and the Renaissance, in addition to the study of anatomy and drawing from life.2 The academy taught a style which combined Venetian color with Florentine attention to drawing and design. The Bolognese painters strived to combine the perfection of nature with the imagination, which resulted in an exaggerated, yet believable, ideal that surpasses the norm. As an unfortunate result, they were often viewed as academics that seemed to believe that the development of the correct style of painting was synthetic. This was, in fact, exactly what Caravaggio disdained and the reason why he sometimes drew criticism from other painters of the period.3

The brothers Annibale and Agostino Carracci united their talents with their cousin Ludovico and founded their own school. This, in turn, was responsible for the enduring careers of many emerging artists of the time.4 They supported an artistic ideal which combined mannerism with naturalism, and employed a warmer, more naturalistic coloration in exchange for the softer, or bright, pastel hues of Mannerism. Central Italian High Renaissance paintings seem cold, and even remote, in comparison

3 Giogio Bonsanit, Caravaggio (Vicenza, Italy: Scala Books, 1984), p.3.
to Carracci’s lively palette. Patrons of the arts seemed to support their favorite artists, no matter the cost. Annibale Carracci was summoned from Bologna by Duke Ranuccio Farnese in around 1597 to decorate the Palazzo Farnese in fresco. He worked in fresco until 1604, while enlisting artists including Agostino and Domenchino in 1603, after the stucco work was completed. Through observation, there seems to be a parallel with Raphael who was summoned from his home in Florence, 187 miles south of Bologna to Rome, less than a century earlier to paint the ceiling of the Vatican library and the Villa Farnesina in 1518. It is 626 miles from Bologna to Rome, and 427 miles from Florence to Rome. Therefore, this would have meant a tremendous trip for each of them.

Annibale took on the project with the ambition to not only match the intensity of illusion in Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel, but to surpass it. Whether he succeeded is a matter of opinion. By investigating pictures of Carracci’s layers of images, one begins to become perplexed and even dizzy in the attempt to interpret the illusionistic from the truly three dimensional. Many of the frescoes have the illusion of framed panel paintings. Quadratura, realistically painted architectural framework, has been fashioned so convincingly it would be unlikely the viewer could discern between the wrought and the real. The artificial and unseen light sources Annibale used are truly unmatched in their dramatic and theatrical results.

The two dimensional “statues,” painted in the grisaille technique, appear to be weathered or even broken. When one comes to the conclusion that a particular sculpture is truly three dimensional, one’s depth perception is again questioned upon seeing the nude figures of ignudi twisting around to look down upon us in the foreground. These are satirical salutes to Michelangelo’s ignudi of the Sistine Chapel ceiling. Still, Michelangelo has earned the credit he deserves in successfully introducing a new and wonderful style to influence and astonish artists for centuries. He was the first to use the grisaille technique to offer the illusion of architecture, rather than as a mere background accent in a painting. Such an example can be seen in the 15th century painting Birth of the Virgin by his teacher, Ghirlandaio.

Annibale was indeed strongly influenced by Michelangelo. Given the choice, it could be said that Michelangelo was a superior master of portraiture, as some of Carracci’s faces seem to be a little strained, and even cartoonish, such as in the most well known fresco of The Triumph of Bacchus. Upon close inspection, Carracci used a series of hatching to aid in the development of a chiaroscuro effect in each image. It seems that Michelangelo painted with broader brushstrokes, while Carracci’s seem sometimes so tight that they appear to be overworked. On a positive note, such a technique might project a more distinct image to the viewers below.

Michelangelo was not Annibale Carracci’s only influence. He was also impacted by the works of Raphael, as well as Titian and other Renaissance artists, and, of course, by the sculpture of the Greeks and Romans. Like Michelangelo, he was strongly influenced by the discovery of the ancient Hellenistic statue of the Laocoon. In fact, Annibale’s work in the Palazzo Farnese is declared by Giovanni Pietro Bellori in 1672 to have earned him the credit of the sole redeemer of classical Roman painting “after an almost unbelievable decline following the death of Raphael.” Less than a century prior, Raphael and other High Renaissance artists like Sodoma and Peruzzi had completed the frescoes of what is now known as the Villa Farnesina. Bought later by the Farnese family, this building is connected to the Palazzo Farnese, now the French Embassy by a bridge over the Tiber River. Annibale, therefore, had convenient access to instant inspiration from the masters of the High Renaissance. Among its many frescoes, the Farnesina exhibits Peruzzi’s Aquarius, an image depicting the figures of a man and an eagle. This image, unusual to High Renaissance standards in its rigidity, is comparable to Carracci’s provocative yet graceful image of The Rape of Ganymede by Jupiter’s Eagle. Carracci extracted the soft beauty and grace of the elegant facial features of the creations of Raphael and combined them with the weighty musculature of architecture, rather than as a mere background accent in a painting. Such an example can be seen in the 15th century painting Birth of the Virgin by his teacher, Ghirlandaio.

the creations of Michelangelo to create a style all his own. The soft rounded figures, complemented by a sweeping, dreamlike landscape, are almost certainly directly influenced by Titian.

*The Loves of the Gods*, which is the theme of the vaulted ceiling of the Palazzo Farnese, is unique because while Carracci utilizes the beautiful twisting movement of organic images in space, he does not usually employ the technique to depict quick, powerful movement as is common in the Baroque style. Creation is not shown here as an unattainably mighty manipulation of forms, but rather as an emotional, intimate and even relatable representation of leisurely acquaintances. Indeed, the omnipotent gods are shown subdued and serene as they’ve laid aside their divine duties to flirt away their time. Fertility as well as sexuality is symbolized by bountiful garlands of fruit and winged cupids, also called “loves” which are comparable to Michelangelo’s putti, advisors of the prophets and sibyls. Annibale even incorporated comical images into the ceiling. From the yawning or bug-eyed satirical masks to the four giant ignudi “rocking crazily on their balustrades,”

14 to mischievous little cupids wrestling and even relieving themselves, Annibale immortalizes a sense of humor which was hopefully appreciated by his patron.

Michelangelo illustrated selections from the book of Genesis while including images of pagan sibyls. These helped to uphold the philosophy of Neo-Platonism, as he also included seven prophets from the Old Testament in the spandrels. Carracci capitalized on the popular philosophy by decorating the entire vault with visual interpretations of pagan myths and legends. The choices in subject matter would certainly be influenced if not entirely chosen by the patron. While Michelangelo, in painting a chapel, would have been required to represent selections from the Bible, Carracci may have been allowed more freedom in the selection of what he depicted. The origin of the idea for the Sistine Chapel is theoretical. Some scholars doubt whether Michelangelo could have concocted such ingenious visual relationships among the figures, stories, and theories depicted in his frescoes. Based on his own inventive style, he must have indeed been a genius, and could very likely have created the images from his own perception. Surely, he was also influenced by the church, and the idea of placing figures from both theologies must have evolved from Pope Julius’ original idea to fill the spandrels with images of the twelve disciples.

It is interesting to note that while Carracci was hired to paint a residency rather than the chapel of a church, he didn’t neglect a certain tradition. In a large chapel, the artist would decorate the walls and ceilings to reflect the subject matter of the altarpiece. Similarly, Annibale Carracci covered the ceiling with images depicting supreme mythological beings, the theme of which was probably derived from the ancient statue of Hercules, the highlight of the Farnese family’s collection of antiquities.

The subject matter is again comparable to Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel in that it implies scenes which are meant to conclude in the creation of mankind, or in Carracci’s particular case, the Roman people. The panel of *Venus and Anchises* is the most specific. In its depiction, the goddess and a mortal are preparing for intimacy. Venus tenderly rests her foot upon a stool inscribed in a Latin phrase implying the origin of the Romans. The idea for this painting came from one of the ancient anonymous Greek poems, *The Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*. Such literature was the source of all of the frescoes of the Farnese Gallery.

Some, like *Polyphemus Furioso*, were based on descriptions of ancient paintings now lost. Carracci’s attention to detail was accurate to the degree in which one could easily mistake the descriptions of these ancient paintings to be descriptions of Carracci’s.

*The Loves of the Gods* consists of panels of images depicting the leisurely romances between anything from gods and goddesses themselves to lusty or unrequited encounters with mortals and half-beasts. Even homosexual encounters are depicted without so much as the slightest attempt towards modesty. Many of the images are quite explicit, even erotic, and enough to make an unsuspecting visitor blush. As an interesting and even somewhat comical note, Agostino even designed and engraved “uncensored” versions of many of the compositions. Apparently, Agostino had a very amorous side behind his infamous reputation of intellect and influence among the aristocracy.

According to Charles Dempsey, the painting of *Venus and Triton* is “the most explicitly…sexual of the entire vault.”

16 Venus’ abandoned pose and the placement of Triton’s hand in an area not covered by cloth in the original cartoon earn this appraisal. This


fresco and the one facing it from the opposite wall are
the only two credited to Annibale’s brother Agostino.
Although Annibale was the youngest among the
artistic Carracci family, he was widely considered the
most talented. He even intervened to adjust parts of
these paintings.

Upon closer inspection of the above fresco after
Dempsey’s observation, one can agree this piece
is quite suggestive. However, the panel which
immediately appeared as the most seductive was
the painting of Juno and Jupiter. The positioning of
the figures is an implication that there will be sexual
activity within seconds. Jupiter seems subdued while
his wife Juno is unusually dominant. From the eager
placement of Jupiter’s hands on her leg to her breasts;
enhanced by the low viewpoint and apparently
defying gravity, this image is outright provocative.
The eye contact and facial expressions shared between
the two figures is enough to convey the message in
and amongst itself.

It’s preceived that the romantic interplay among
the divine beings to be an unintentional introduction
to the art of the Rococo period. I derive this theory
from my observations of Carracci’s sweeping
brushwork particularly in his Titian inspired
landscape18, (although quick, loose brushwork is
essential in all fresco painting), combined with
the amorous mood of his creations. Landscape in
painting also evolved into a distinguishing and even
focal feature of the art of the Rococo. Carracci utilized
a masterful representation of imagined landscapes
before landscape painting had reached this pinnacle.
Indeed, Michelangelo seemed to avoid landscape
painting, as even in his fresco depicting the Divine
separation from light and darkness he dedicated
nothing more than a cramped corner to God’s entire
creation of flora.

I cannot elaborate on his efforts to recreate plant
life without including my observations of the animal
figures portrayed by Annibale. As a contemporary
artist, it is interesting to realize the positive effects of
photography and of opportunities to study animals

18 Heinrich Wölfflin, Principles of Art History, Seventh Edition

which were almost entirely inaccessible to painters
of the preceding centuries. For example, Annibale’s
dolphins are nearly identical to Raphael’s, yet they
look nothing like the marine mammals we recognize
today. Even Michelangelo’s fish in his fresco of
the prophet Jonah has nostrils, which reveals the
immature development of natural science of the time,
the artist’s poor observation, or a combination of both.
Carracci’s tigers are awkward and disproportionate
with details he must have improvised, having never
seen a tiger, yet his depictions of goats are beautiful,
suggesting his familiarity with livestock versus
exotics. Animal forms other than that of the revered,
and almost deified, human figure may also have
been treated with less attention towards perfection.
With humanism, the focus was definitely on the
proportions and symmetry of the human body. Even
in his day, as well as today, Annibale’s artwork was
recognized as exceptional and unusual; today it is a
cornerstone of stylistic transition.

Annibale Carracci bestowed upon the world of
art a masterpiece comparable in its significance to
the timeless works of Michelangelo and Raphael.
Through his enhancement of the ceiling of the Palazzo
Farnese, he eternalized the climax of his artistic career.
Sadly, upon the completion of the project, Annibale
became depressed and departed the earthly realm
within a few years. He had reached his pinnacle, had
completed the masterwork of his life, and apparently
felt he had completed his purpose in life. None of
his later works were comparable to The Loves of the
Gods. His frescoes represent the epiphany of a style
which he helped to create and immortalize; a style
both naturalistic and imaginative, physical and
spiritual; which resurrected classicism, and exalted
Neo-Platonism. His efforts in art represent a link
between Mannerism and Baroque, and even hint at
a premature introduction to the Rococo period. His
obsession to produce believable illusions may be
comparable to that of Paolo Uccello and interest in
linear perspective. He succeeded in developing his
own dramatic style after studying the works of Titian,
Raphael and Michelangelo, one that was unlike any,
but encompassed all, that of Annibale Carracci.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


