

The Feud that Sparked the Renaissance - Seminar 1

The Contexts and Lorenzo Ghiberti

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Lecture Notes No1

The Feud that Sparked the Renaissance THE CONTEXTS

This title of my lectures is the title of a book by the American author Paul Robert Walker. It is catchy and journalistic and like most headlines catches the eye but it does not reflect the truth and certainly not the whole truth. The feud that the author refers to occurred in Florence at the turn of the fourteenth century was between **Lorenzo Ghiberti** and **Filippo Brunelleschi**. The feud according to Walker started as a result of the competition set by *Arte di Calmila* (Wool Merchants' Guild)ⁱ who wished to move the pair of doors designed by **Andrea Pisano** in 1329 for the octagonal Baptistery, that faced the Domo and replace them with a new pair, To this end the guild set up a competition inviting artists to submit a design plate in brass depicting *The Sacrifice of Isaac*. The artist, who in their estimation, produced the best design would be contracted to produce the doors that would illustrate scenes from the Old Testament.ⁱⁱ

No single event created the Renaissance in Art; the Renaissance came about because an amalgam of factors cohered in Florence at the beginning of the 15thC Florence was a city whose population through the successive waves of plague, including the Black death of 1348 had been reduced in the 14thC from over 120,000 to fewer than 65000. These epidemics continued in the first quarter of the fourteenth century with the result that the population fell to 40,000 by 1427. This reduction had a major effect on the city's major industrial capacity; namely the production of textiles. Added to these woes was the almost continuous pursuit of wars firstly with Naples

ⁱ *Arte di Calmila* was responsible for the maintenance of the Baptistery of St. John (Battistero di San Giovanni)

ⁱⁱ In the event the programme was changed from Old Testament to a series of New Testament scenes encased into 28 quatrefoils. plus saints

and then against its nearest neighbours, the principle being Milan. Although these were not fought by its citizens but by mercenary armies they had to be paid causing serious drain upon the city's finances.

By the end of the 14thC the fusion of Italian and Northern European art had led to the development of an **International Gothic style**. For the next quarter of a century, leading artists travelled from Italy to France, and vice versa, and all over Europe. A style mainly based on decorated manuscripts. As a consequence, ideas spread and merged, until eventually painters in this International Gothic style could be found in France, Italy, England, Germany, Austria and Bohemia. Artistically artists in Florence such as Gentile de Fabrino (1370-1427) painted in the International Gothic style. Gentile left his mark in Florence in 1423 with his altarpiece of the *Adoration of the Magi* painted for the church of Sta Trinità. So how was it that at the beginning of the 15thC Renaissance art was born in Florence? This the question that these seminars will explore

Art is not produced in a vacuum

The production of art is influenced by the prevailing geographical, political, economic and social situations, religious ethos and artistic practices. There were various factors that brought the Renaissance about. But the most important was a revival of interest in classical antiquity and with it a change in the prevalent philosophy largely based on Classical sources. This change can be summarised from scholasticism to humanism.

Scholasticism

Scholasticism was the dominant philosophy from mid 11thC to early 15thC. It was a philosophy that integrated Greek reasoning (*mainly Aristotelian*) and Christian Supernatural revelation. A basic principle of scholasticism was that God (truth) is the source of both knowledge and revelation but that direct revelation from God had a

higher certitude than man's reasoning. Faith was always the supreme arbiter; theologian's decision overruled that of the philosopher. However the theologian used philosophy to understand and explain revelation. Originality and novelty was not sought. Questions raised were referred to Aristotelian texts and to the thoughts of early Christian fathers'; questioning scientific methods was not encouraged.

St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) was a dominant exponent of Scholasticism. Aquinas' philosophical thought has exerted enormous influence on subsequent Christian theology, especially that of the Roman Catholic Church, extending to Western philosophy in general. Aquinas insisted that the truths of faith and those of sense experience, as presented by Aristotle, are fully compatible and complementary. Some truths, such as the mystery of the incarnation, can be known only through revelation, and others, such as the composition of material things, only through experience; still others, such as the existence of God, are known through both equally.

Humanism.

There was a gradual change from this scholastic philosophy that later became known as Humanism. The term was first coined by French historian Jules Michelet (1798–1874), in his 1855 work, *Histoire de France* though Vasariⁱⁱⁱ considered that there was a rebirth of art in Florence starting with Giotto. Humanism was an attitude that emphasised the dignity and worth of the individual. A basic principle of humanism is that people are rational beings who possess within themselves the capacity for truth and goodness. It was not a coherent philosophy or religion. It did not reject the supernatural or in the belief in God. Yet it noted that Sophist Greeks like Protagoras considered that '*man is the measure of all things*'. The movement started as a literary exploration with the revival of Greek and Roman studies *that emphasised the value of Classics for its own sake, rather than for their relevance to Christianity*. The

ⁱⁱⁱ In his book *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*

rediscovery of the classics was not a *rediscovery* as such for Scholasticism also referred to the classics. It was viewing classical writings in a new historical perspective by interpreting them in their contemporary context as opposed to *scholasticism* which viewed them as a kind of revealed knowledge that predated Christianity but which needed the interpretation of the early Christian fathers and Saints. **Petrarch** (1304-1374) a dominant scholar and poet who sought ancient Greek and Latin classical texts lying in monasteries in Europe;^{iv} His wide knowledge of classical authors gained in the main through this search of texts and his restoration of classical Latin language earned him the reputation as the first great humanist.

Humanism rejected medieval scholasticism and insisted on continuity between pagan and Christian creativity. Humanists assisted in the consolidation of a new spiritual and intellectual outlook and in the development of a body of knowledge. It led to people to seek *knowledge through experience* acquired through the senses as opposed to blindly accepting knowledge as *revelations* interpreted by the teachings of Church elders and saints. It emphasised the dignity of man. In place of the medieval ideal of a life of penance as the highest and noblest form of human activity, the Humanists looked to the struggle of man to exert mastery over nature. In summary

- It was NOT a coherent philosophy or religion
- It did not reject the supernatural or in the belief in God
- Yet noted that Sophist Greeks like Protagoras considered that '*man is the measure of all things*'
- This led to an **attitude** that people are rational beings who possess within themselves the capacity for truth and goodness. It emphasised human and naturalistic viewpoint and the need for scientific approach to the understanding of nature rather than religious or transcendental values. Humanism had several significant features such as It took

^{iv} Mostly copies made during the Carolingian era (c AD 780 to 900).

human nature in all of its various manifestations and achievements as its subject

- It emphasised the dignity of man.
- In place of the medieval ideal of a life of penance as the highest and noblest form of human activity, the Humanists looked to the struggle of creation and the attempt to exert mastery over nature.
- Education must train all children to be able to argue both sides of a question and see the other point of view as preparation for the political life, where laws are passed and justice dispensed by ordinary people (Early Greeks and Christians believed laws were God-given and therefore unchallengeable, whereas according to Protagoras (*a pre-Socratic Greek philosopher*) they were man-made and could be altered)

Humanism had a great effect on art.

The change of perception led Artists to represent the world as seen by the eyes as opposed by the soul. However the visual *realistic* image could convey a religious message but it was not an icon. Other effects included:

- Subject Matter - Most art was commissioned thus educated Humanist Patrons had a major input.
- Use of Classical myths as allegories
- Scientific approach – especially in the realm of optics
- Naturalism – emphasis on representing believable space and human forms

There was a change of perceptions by both patrons and painters. In the late medieval period in that personages of the remote past or the distant future could share the stage of time with characters of the present. Objects that were plainly recognized as symbols could mingle with real buildings, plants or implements on the same level of *non-reality*. This high medieval blend of present, past and future, of

things symbolic, proved to be less and less compatible with a style which, with the introduction of perspective had begun to commit itself to naturalism. This introduction of naturalism was fostered by the emphasis on the new emphasis in representations. Perspective implies that the painting surface is understood as a *window* through which the onlooker looks out into a section of space. Thus *pictorial space* should be subject to the rules that govern *empirical space*. There must be no obvious contradictions between what we see in the picture and what we might see in reality excepting the symbolic representations of spiritual events.

Roots of Humanism

Cimabue (1240-1302) though working in the Greek ('i.e .Byzantine) manner is credited to have begun the movement towards greater realism. Though Byzantine mosaics and paintings are characterized by a rich use of colour and figures which seem flat and stiff. Furthermore the figures also tend to appear to be floating; to have large eyes and are usually set against backgrounds that are solidly golden or toned. Intended as religious lessons, they were presented clearly and simply in order to be easily learned. But it was his pupil **Giotto di Bondone** (c. 1267 - 1337).who is universally recognised as the first genius of art in the Italian Renaissance. Although Giotto lacked the technical knowledge of anatomy and perspective .he possessed an infinitely greater attribute than the technical skill of the artists who followed him. He had a grasp of human emotion and of what was significant in human life. In concentrating on these essentials he created compelling pictures of people under stress, of people caught up in crises and soul-searching decisions. Giotto is regarded as the founder of the central tradition of Western painting because his work broke free from the stylizations of Byzantine art, introduced new ideals of naturalism and created a convincing sense of pictorial space.

Although by the beginning of the fifteenth century there were several patrons and artists who were imbued with humanist ideas the

two seminars concentrate on just four artists who at the beginning of the fifteenth century in Florence set the foundation of the Italian Renaissance. The artists are: Lorenzo Ghiberti (1378-1455); Filippo Brunelleschi (1377-1446,); Donatello 1386, died at aged 80 in 1466 and Tommaso Masaccio (1401 –1428). Ghiberti was awarded the contract.

The doors of the Baptistery

This lecture focuses on the commissions by the *Arte di Calimala*, the guild of the cloth finishers and merchants in foreign cloth,^v to have pairs of bronze doors for the Baptistery.

In 1330 they commissioned **Andrea Pisano** (1290 – 1348)^{vi} to make the first pair. These bronze doors for the Baptistery have twenty scenes representing the life of St John the Baptist and eight Virtues. The doors comprises of two halves, each with 14 square panels. Twenty of the panels depict events from the life of John the Baptist while the eight at the bottom are personifications of virtues. The twenty scenes relating to John the Baptist read chronologically from top to bottom and from left to right-on each halve^{vii}. They show a melodious line and a jeweller's refinement of execution. It is a fine late Gothic work

The First Ghiberti's doors

During the winter of 1400 - 1401, the consuls of the guild *Arte di Calimala* decided to open a competition for another set of doors. These were originally intended for the East doors. These doors, facing the west entrance of the Duomo, were considered the most important doors. Some six artists were selected from a number of competitors who submitted brass plaques illustrating the *Sacrifice of*

^v *The Arte di Calimala*, one of the greater guilds of Florence which had the responsibility for the maintenance of the Baptistery,

^{vi} **Andrea Pisano** Italian sculptor and architect influenced by Giotto, who in 1340 had succeeded Giotto as Master of the Works, Florence Cathedral.

^{vii} That is, like pages of an open book, they read individually and not across the pages

Isaac. Two of the most prominent were Filippo Brunelleschi and Lorenzo Ghiberti. The latter, who produced an elegant plaque cast almost entirely from a single sheet of brass, was chosen to construct the doors. One the main reason for the choice was technical – Ghiberti used less brass^{viii} (*the ore was mined in Burgundy*) in casting the image.

The programme for the doors was changed from Old Testament to a series of New Testament scenes encased into 28 quatrefoils. The theme that was finally adopted was the depiction of the life of Christ in 20 scenes with the 8 lower panels containing the Evangelists and Fathers of the Church. As these doors were kept shut, except on feast days, the scenes read from the bottom across both wings. Each scene employs just a few figures, dramatically set in high relief against a neutral background, with the context conveyed by minimal stage like settings (though with some minutely observed details in the landscapes), and all executed in the graceful linear rhythms of the *International Gothic style*. The first panels executed reveal that Ghiberti tried to harmonize his compositions with the Gothic quatrefoil. The slender, lyrical figures approximate those of International Gothic painters like Lorenzo Monaco and Gentile da Fabriano. Their draperies establish patterns of fluid elegance which contribute a rhythmic unity to the design. As his work progressed, his compositions became more complex and his forms began to fight with the quatrefoil. Since he included ever more ambitious architectural and geometrical elements, his compositions evolved towards the newly introduced rectilinear Renaissance format.

Executed between 1403 and 1424, the commission necessitated the establishment of a large workshop in which many of the future masters of the Florentine school received their training, including Donatello, Masolino, Uccello and Antonio Pollaiuolo. Ghiberti made several other works during the twenty one years it took him to complete the doors, including two larger-than-life bronze statues of saints for the niches on the exterior of Orsanmichele in;

^{viii} The ore was mined in Burgundy and expensive

Florence; namely *John the Baptist* that was completed for the cloth merchants' guild in 1416, and *St. Matthew* that was installed in its niche in 1422 for the bankers' guild. *John the Baptist* was the first monumental bronze figure since antiquity. The work, cast in one piece, was so difficult to execute that the guild stipulated it be undertaken at the sculptor's risk. It still reflected the International Gothic style, whilst *St. Matthew* represented Ghiberti's new classical style; in pose the figure reflects an ancient Roman philosopher type.

"*Gates of Paradise*"

When his first set of twenty-eight panels were completed Ghiberti was commissioned to produce a second set for another doorway in the church, this time with scenes from the Old Testament, as originally intended for his first set. Instead of twenty-eight scenes, he produced ten rectangular scenes in a completely different style. They were more naturalistic, in that Ghiberti used perspective yet he idealized the subjects. Michelangelo dubbed these scenes the "*Gates of Paradise*."

Began in 1425 and completed in 1452 the panels illustrate more than 30 different moments from the Old Testament. They begin with the *Creation of Adam and Eve* and end with *Solomon and the Queen of Sheba*. Lorenzo Ghiberti made a complete transition from the outdated Gothic style with its swirling draperies to the Renaissance style in panels in which the figures are now completely naturalistic, their forms revealed by the drapery, not competing with it. The idealized figures appear to move freely within the pictorial space which recedes convincingly within an illusionistic, architectural framework based on Brunelleschi's linear perspective.

Each panel contains an old Testament scene of great complexity and elaboration. For example in the *Creation and fall of Man* four separate episodes from Genesis are represented and the varying depths of relief to suggest recession is of the utmost refinement. Whilst in the scene of *Jacob and Esau* the subtleties of relief allows

Ghiberti to set the different incidents of his narrative within an architectural framework receding in the distance and yet it enables him to do so without violating the structural unity of the surface. For example in the *Creation and fall of Man* plaque four separate episodes from Genesis are represented and the varying depths of relief suggesting recession are of the utmost refinement. (Whilst in the scene of *Jacob and Esau* the subtleties of relief allow Ghiberti to set the different incidents of his narrative within an architectural framework receding in the distance and yet it enables him to do so without violating the structural unity of the surface.) The five scenes from Genesis depicted in the *Creation and fall of Man* plaque display the artist's adept observations of human anatomy and nature while portraying marvellous heavenly beings.

In the *Jacob and Esau* Panel Ghiberti employed the new system of linear perspective to construct the narrative. He arranged the episodes of the story around a vanishing point framed by the central arch of a Renaissance loggia. This panel, with its nearly three-dimensional foreground figures, masterful use of scientific perspective, and impressive architecture, shows that the artist was at the vanguard of Florentine illusionism and storytelling.

The Gates of Paradise have been praised by generations of artists and art historians for their compelling portrayal of scenes from the Old Testament. Over time, the seventeen-foot-tall, three-ton bronze doors became an icon of Renaissance Art and a touchstone of civic and religious life in Florence. But it is Ghiberti's display of craftsmanship and his aesthetic sense of beauty that makes them a masterpiece that Michelangelo called "*truly worthy to be the Gates of Paradise*" for its remarkable beauty and grandeur. The panels offer viewers a coherent vision of Ghiberti's artistic genius and his innovative use of perspective.

The Gates of Paradise also dramatically illustrate how the transition in style from the International Gothic to the Renaissance could take place without losing the aesthetic quality of the former

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- Highly recommended



Lorenzo Ghiberti (1378 –1455),

SOME RENAISSANCE FIRSTS

New Techniques

Oil Painting

Woodcut

Copper Plate

Printed Books

Rules of Linear Perspective

New genres

Free standing Statues - equestrian & portrait busts

Landscapes and still life

MAKING THE *GATES OF PARADISE*

During the Renaissance, bronze was far more costly than marble, and it posed significant technical difficulties in an age before industrial casting. Ghiberti created the *Gates of Paradise* using a technique known as lost wax casting. After making drawings and sketch models in clay or wax, he prepared full-scale, detailed wax representations of every component of the reliefs. (Some scientists and scholars believe that he modelled his reliefs directly in wax; others propose that he made an initial model in another material and then made an indirect wax cast.) When Ghiberti and his assistants finished a model, they added wax rods in branching patterns to its back. The entire relief was then covered in a fire-resistant material like clay and heated until the wax melted out, leaving a hollow mould. The spaces that had been occupied by the rods served as sprues (channels) through which bronze reached the surface of the relief. The sprues were cut away from the reliefs after casting, but their remains are still visible on the back of each panel.

Ghiberti's work was only half finished when he took the bronzes out of their molds. He still needed to complete the time-consuming and tedious work of chasing—that is, hammering, carving, incising, and polishing the reliefs. Utilizing his training as a goldsmith, he directed his numerous assistants in cleaning and enhancing details on the surface of the metal.

Ghiberti used a bronze alloy that was somewhat more difficult to cast than other bronzes of the period but was also very receptive to gilding. He mixed gold dust with mercury and painted the mixture across the front surface of each relief. Some of his brushstrokes are still visible, but, for the most part, he succeeded in creating a smooth, luminous surface that suggests air and atmosphere. To make the gold adhere to the bronze, Ghiberti heated each relief to burn off the mercury, leaving only the gold in place. This was a toxic and dangerous process that is no longer used.

FIGURES AND HEADS OF PROPHETS

The narrative panels of the *Gates of Paradise* are framed by a series of 20 prophets in niches alternating with 24 projecting heads. The standing figures, such as Restored Figure of a prophet in Niche represent Old Testament prophets, heroines, and sibyls, generally credited with foretelling the birth of Christ. The heads also depict prophets, as in Restored Prophets Head but include portraits of Ghiberti and his son Vittorio, who continued the family workshop after his father's death, as well. The elements of the doorframe amplify the main themes of the narrative panels and serve as another example of Ghiberti's artistic inventiveness. The exhibition shows two heads and two prophets taken from the doorframe. One set has been cleaned; the other has not. The contrast between each set demonstrates far better than words the impact of conservation in restoring the clarity and detail of Ghiberti's masterpiece.

Genesis Chapter 25

21 And Isaac entreated the LORD for his wife, because she was barren; and the LORD let Himself be entreated of him, and Rebekah his wife conceive

22 And the children struggled together within her; and she said: 'If it be so, wherefore do I live?' And she went to inquire of the LORD.

23 And the LORD said unto her: Two nations are in thy womb, and two peoples shall be separated from thy bowels; and the one people shall be stronger than the other people; and the elder shall serve the younger.

24 And when her days to be delivered were fulfilled, behold, there were twins in her womb.

25 And the first came forth ruddy, all over like a hairy mantle; and they called his name Esau.

26 And after that came forth his brother, and his hand had hold on Esau's heel; and his name was called Jacob. And Isaac was threescore years old when she bore them.

27 And the boys grew; and Esau was a cunning hunter, a man of the field; and Jacob was a quiet man, dwelling in tents.

28 Now Isaac loved Esau, because he did eat of his venison; and Rebekah loved Jacob.

29. And Jacob sod pottage; and Esau came in from the field, and he was faint.

30 And Esau said to Jacob: 'Let me swallow, I pray thee, some of this red, red pottage; for I am faint.' Therefore was his name called Edom.

31 And Jacob said: 'Sell me first thy birthright.'

32 And Esau said: 'Behold, I am at the point to die; and what profit shall the birthright do to me?'

33 And Jacob said: 'Swear to me first'; and he swore unto him; and he sold his birthright unto Jacob.

34 And Jacob gave Esau bread and pottage of lentils; and he did eat and drink, and rose up, and went his way. So Esau despised his birthright.

