

The Influence of Neoplatonism on Michelangelo and His Works

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Abstract. Neo-Platonism had an influence on many artists during the Renaissance. Michelangelo is one of the most perfect artists to inherit and develop his ideas. This paper will take Neo-Platonism and the influence of Neo-Platonism on Michelangelo's artistic creation as the theme, combining the ideas of Neo-Platonism and the presentation of Michelangelo's works. In exploring this connection, it is found that Michelangelo did not accept Neo-Platonism as some sort of convincing philosophical system, much less as the fashion of the age, but as a metaphysical release of his own. Therefore, Michelangelo had a more complex ideological development process than their contemporaries. Neo-Platonism laid a solid theoretical foundation for Michelangelo's artistic creation. Finally, this paper analyzes the ways in which Michelangelo's sculpture "Dying Slave" and painting "Genesis" are influenced by Neo-Platonism. Due to the strong religious connotation of Neo-Platonism, the works of Michelangelo and the contemporary masters with more simple humanistic thoughts have a stronger religious tragedy color.

Keywords: Neo-Platonism, Michelangelo, *The Dying Slave*, *Genesis*, Renaissance.

1. Introduction

Neo-Platonism is a combination of Platonic objective idealism, Christian theology and eastern mysticism, and it is also a bridge connecting ancient and medieval aesthetic thoughts [1]. Platonism influenced artists in Florence during the Renaissance, which is related to the Neo-Platonism movement that arose in northern Italy in the 15th century. As for Michelangelo, when he was a boy apprentice working in the Courtyard of the Medici, he became fascinated with Neo-Platonism from the great masters of philosophy at the famous "Platonic Academy" in Florence, such as Ficino, Landino, Mirandola, and Poliziano. The Florentine thinkers of the 15th century who had a direct influence on Michelangelo were the same people who worked to revive Plato and Neo-Platonic philosophy. This paper will be divided into several parts to elaborate on the connection between the above thinkers and Michelangelo and his works. Firstly, it will introduce the cultural background of Neo-Platonism and Renaissance, and understand the status, significance and role of Neo-Platonism in the aspects of philosophy and religion in the literary period. The second part is about the introduction of Michelangelo himself and his relationship with Neo-Platonism, including how Michelangelo came into contact with Neo-Platonism and how he was influenced by it. The third part is about how Neo-Platonism is presented in Michelangelo's works. This paper divides this part into two objects, namely the sculpture *The Dying Slave* and the painting *Genesis*.

2. The Emergence and Significance of Neo-Platonism

Italy is the birthplace of Neo-Platonism. Ficino (1433-1499) and others founded the Platonic Academy in Florence and established the basic theoretical framework of Neo-Platonism. The main task of the Platonic Academy is to combine Platonic idealism with Christianity and make a theological explanation of Platonic philosophy. The idealism and mysticism of Neo-Platonism were absorbed and utilized by Christian theologians.

According to Ficino, man's main purpose is to become like the supreme God. In his Latin translation of Plato's writings, he states that God's mission to philosophy is to ensure that religion "is the only way to happiness," which is common to ordinary and learned men alike, and even emphasizes that this task is embodied by God through Plato: "Thus the Almighty God, at the time of his choosing, sends down from heaven the spirit of Plato's divinity, during his life, In his genius, miraculously in

his eloquence, Plato explains the sacred religion among the whole people." Ficino promoted his own philosophy in the name of Plato, while at the same time trying to remain an orthodox Christian.

The Ficino school believed that the large world was similar in structure to the small world. Just as the universe is made up of both material and immaterial, so is the human being made up of both material body and an immaterial soul. The former is the proper form of matter, and the latter is attached to it -- in the body. Of course, the soul still exists in its lower form; and it is the human spirit that connects them closely.

Thus, Neo-Platonism holds that the world has two poles, one end of which is the divine light called God, and the other end is total darkness. But Neo-Platonism also believes that total darkness does not exist, just a lack of light. The only thing that exists is God, who shines the divine light, but just as the light fades, the divine light does not shine all over the world.

The most famous influence of this concept on Michelangelo is that quote, which Michelangelo has famously defined vividly: "Art achieved by cutting." He also expressed an almost mystical understanding of the art of sculpture in some poems: "The merit of the artist's creative genius lies only in freeing the image from its shell." For "just as high style, low style and middle style are hidden in ink and nib, so the image of the noble and the image of the foolish are hidden in marble"[2]. It seems that the artist's imagination got the Madonna by putting her vivid image into solid rock and then knocking off the extra stone. The image contained in the marble seemed to him like a slave in a prison waiting to be opened for him. Panofsky notes, "He restores Plotinus's allegorical interpretation of the 'process' as the statuary form, the process of freedom from the stubborn stone. [3]"

3. Michelangelo and Neoplatonism

3.1. The Life of Michelangelo and Platonism

Michelangelo Buonarroti was born on March 6, 1475, in Caprese Michelangelo, a small town near the Renaissance city of Florence. When Michelangelo was born, his sickly mother Francesca, unable to care for him, and sent him to be fed by a wet nurse in the nearby town of Cetilno. The town of Settignano is rich in marble, and the wet nurse's husband is a worker in the local quarry. Michelangelo spent most of his childhood in this mountain town. Michelangelo formally tried his hand at the sculpture at the age of 14, and within days he had successfully sculpted the head of the mythical god Faun.

At this time, Florence was the center of the Renaissance, and the Medici family was a particularly famous family in Florence, Italy, and the whole Renaissance movement was centered around the Medici family [4]. His talent attracted the attention of Lorenzode Medici (1449-1492). The generous patron of the arts and scholarship invited 14-year-olds to live in his palace. Since then, due to his outstanding talent, he was highly valued and appreciated by Lorenzo, the ruler of the Medici family at that time. A large number of artworks in the family court were the objects of his study and research. He also often communicated with humanistic poets and scholars in the palace and was greatly influenced by them [4]. Michelangelo was deeply influenced by humanistic values and Neo-Platonism, and the secular beauty they advocated brought him a strong shock.

From Michelangelo's experience as a boy apprentice working in the Medici Court, he was exposed to Neo-Platonism by the great philosophers at the famous Platonic Academy in Florence. It was here that mysterious, profound philosophy resonated most harmoniously with the qualities of the artist's mind, and as a Platonist, he became so well known among his contemporaries that some even called him "Plato the Second."

3.2. The Ideological Influence of Platonism on Michelangelo

Michelangelo, an Italian artist in the high Renaissance, had a deep tendency of philosophical contemplation. He seemed to explore the universe and the soul with more enthusiasm and persistence than artistic issues [5]. He is the only master who can be compared with Da Vinci in his system of individual ideas. However, the similarities between the two men end there, because their ideas are

completely different. Nature was the only respect for Da Vinci, and his conscious activity was almost unrestrained. Michelangelo. On the contrary, for him, every action of the spiritual world was always confined and restricted by "matter", and only after tragic resistance could he hope to get free, just as his statues all seemed to struggle out of the stone. Michelangelo's philosophy is to value inner feelings and ignore outer impressions. This is the influence of Platonism or Neo-Platonism on him.

Michelangelo once said: " Good painting, approaching God and uniting with God...It is only the perfect copy of God, the shadow under God's brush, the God's music, the God's melody...Therefore, it is not enough for a painter to become a master of greatness and finesse. I think his life should be pure and holy, so that the divine spirit may rule over his thoughts... [6]"

Michelangelo, more than anyone else, seems to have felt the bitter, intoxicating taste of religious pessimism, and at the same time produced perhaps the most profoundly symbolic great work in the history of art. His depth was as if his pain came from his faith. However, in the Renaissance, an era of ideological liberation when he should have stepped out of the shadow of the church, he was still intoxicated by the bleak light of the Savior's faith. Therefore, compared with other contemporary painters who were deeply influenced by humanism, Michelangelo was conservative [7].

4. The Embodiment of Neo-Platonism in Michelangelo's Works

4.1. Sculpture

For Michelangelo, the world as an artist's vibrant object undoubtedly had a great fascination. And the world of ideas that exist as Platonist is infinitely richer and more exciting. It is entirely possible that Michelangelo's mind, filled with transcendental ideologies such as scripture and faith, was constantly engaged in a struggle between two artistic concepts. How should nature and ideal be combined? Does it have to be proportional? However, for his artistic creation, it is not so much based on objective principles to create images in accordance with the natural law, as it is based on subjective principles to give the subject provided by the belief in the visual form of the idea. For sculpture, Michelangelo believed in a purely Platonic idea that the creation of the statue meant liberation from the hard stone. In this sense, then, the stone is to him a substance or a mask that holds the form -- or, in the abstract, a law that determines the form. This law comes from and is bound by Providence, and form is not free. That is to say, the not free image to be created is also the arrangement of Providence: as nature itself, whether it resists or submits to Providence, its imfreedom cannot be changed, but only by the hammer in the sculptor's hand. If, in accordance with the requirements of the imitation of nature, the form is indeed liberated from the binding of materials, it is in a sense a violation of the will of God, or a crime, because the sculptor cannot guarantee without harm the realization of the idea of the image that has been made and imprisoned in accordance with the will of God. When discussing why Michelangelo left so many unfinished works, the German Ayim hypothesized that: it was a similar fear or unease that caused the master to drop the hammer repeatedly in the process of creation [8]. These are undoubtedly some of the most painful moments, because on the one hand artist have to struggle to achieve artist's artistic goals. On the other hand, artist have to give up. It is painful enough to make one despair. In fact, the excessively sad character of Michelangelo's art has much to do with his self-seeking character, but it also has much to do with his ideology, which derives from Platonic philosophy or even Christian theology.

In accordance with Michelangelo's conception of sculpture as a process of releasing an image buried in stone, people will take just a few examples of his works (groups) and briefly explain that these stone statues were used or were originally intended to be used as decorative works on the temple tombs of the Medici clan.

In the mausoleum of Pope Julius II are Michelangelo's "Captive Slave" and "Dying Slave" and unfinished sculptures of four existing Florentine academies. According to the master's original design, there would have been about twenty of them, each bound to a square pilaster on either side of the niche for the Victor statue. The slaves symbolized the death of free arts as captives of the Pope's demise. In the 20th century, however, Erwin Panofsky took the slave statue to mean more than that,

at least in a narrow sense, as a moral metaphor for the unreformed human soul bound by its natural aspirations. That is to say, there is a more special meaning lurking within it a Platonic meaning. Take Dying Slave as an example. In the left leg bend behind the perfect young man's body, there is a thick carved gorilla face. The ugly "companion" has a "class" meaning. That is, it is used to describe the attributes of the slave. Because orangutans look and act more like humans than any other animal, and because of their lack of reason and lechery, they are used to symbolize all the lesser human things like greed and desire. From this point of view, the chimp, which means lower soul, is the logical symbol of bound slaves, tied to a square pilaster symbolized by material things, deprived of free human souls (captured by material desire). By contrast, if slaves represent the human soul bound by matter, they are also akin to the animal soul. The group of victors in the niche, then, represented the human soul in freedom, having conquered passion by reason; The two complement each other and represent human life on earth: defeat and victory at great cost and with great tenacity.

4.2. Painting

Michelangelo's sketches have very similar artistic features to his sculptures, and traces of his sculpture creation can be found in the master's sketches [9]. Therefore, even though Michelangelo is famous for his wonderful sculptures in general recognition, the ideological guidance of his painting works is also similar to that of his sculptures. People can also find Neo-Platonism by doing in Michelangelo's paintings.

On November 1, 1512, one of the largest frescoes in the history of world art, the Book of Genesis, was seen on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. The creation of Genesis made Michelangelo, the greatest sculptor of our time, the greatest painter alongside Da Vinci. At the age of 37, he was honored as "the Holy Michelangelo". Michelangelo was commissioned by the Pope to make this painting of the ceiling. At that time, works of art often had nothing to do with aesthetics, and patrons usually commissioned artists to make works of art with specific religious and political intentions [10]. However, Michelangelo still showed himself to be different from other master's in religious subjects.

In terms of composition, in the Sistine Vault frescoes, Michelangelo combines traditional Hebrew Christian theology with the Neo-platonic ideas he learned during his service to the Medici family. The space is divided into geometric shapes, including triangles, circles and squares. Neo-Platonic philosophy sees them as eternal shapes that suggest the nature of the universe. Three motifs were chosen to paint the entire vault: the Hebrew Chronicles and the story of Jesus' ancestors, the ancient prophets and witches, and Genesis. It is no accident that the number "three" appears here, symbolizing the three levels of thought in the Neo-platonic world. This rule of thirds runs like an undercurrent through all aspects of Platonic thought. Neo-Platonism, for example, divides society into three classes: laborers, freemen, and philosophers. The three metals of copper, silver, and gold represent these three classes. Each class has its own unique goals: interest in profit, the establishment of ambition, and the pursuit of truth. Learning is divided into three: ignorance, insight and knowledge. According to Neo-Platonic theory, the human soul is also divided into three parts: lust, emotion and reason. They are located in the abdomen, chest and head. Only those of reason or force can pursue immortality.

In the order of paintings, Michelangelo took the whole universe as his theme, painting the first scene of the creation of the earth, the power of God, and the heroism of man...Instead of describing the story in chronological order as in Genesis, Michelangelo depicted the story in Genesis using flashbacks or tracing human beings from the lowest level back to the divine origin as in the neo-Platonic doctrine. The two ends of the cycle show the maximum contrast: the beginning, Above the entrance, the Drunkenness of Noah suggests the sacrifice of the soul for the pleasure of the flesh, and finally, above the altar, God's great creation as a purely spiritual force, a reincarnation that, according to Neo-Platonic thought, takes one from the lowest state to the divine origin.

In the process of attachment to God, the imprisoned soul retains the memory of the lost state, and together with the memory continues to struggle to restore the freedom of the soul. This nostalgia of the soul is a driving force in the process of the mind's liberation from the physical imprisonment, gradually becoming aware of the existence of God, gradually moving from the finite into the infinite,

from the physical into the spiritual freedom, in this sense, Eternity is not a reward for passive and blameless existence, but for the final result of the soul's struggle from the darkness of ignorance into the radiance.

5. Conclusion

Neo-Platonism is the foundation of Michelangelo's artistic creation, and the mainstream of Michelangelo's artistic thought is Neo-Platonism. Examining Michelangelo's artistic creation, it is indeed not difficult to find his philosophical basis. In the commercial atmosphere of Italy at that time, the value of a painter was closely tied to the quality of the work sold to patrons, and honor and money would only recognize those who were highly skilled. Painters were constantly improving their abilities and cultural literacy in order to be responsible for their work. But among all the painters, Michelangelo stands out because, in addition to respecting the objective existence of nature and being responsible for the quality of his works, Michelangelo's works also contain a kind of almost superstitious spirit, which is what he thinks, the liberation of the spirit of the gods.

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