‘Man’ and Western Arts

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Abstract. The history of Western artworks shows that the concept of human being has been evolving, from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance and then to the Enlightenment. During the Enlightenment, humans gradually learned what they wanted and sought their own freedom. However, the emphasis on humanism in the Enlightenment ignored women, slaves, and non-white races, which had its limitations.

Keywords: Man; Western Arts; freedom.

1. Introduction

The idea of ‘Man’ was frustrated in the Middle Ages, emerged in the Renaissance era, and developed during the Enlightenment period. In the middle Ages, man lives were thought be determined by religion, thereby, cancelling out human agency. Therefore, with the control of the Church, God was considered the centre of the world. A typical painting which represented the mediaeval ages.

2. What is ‘Man’

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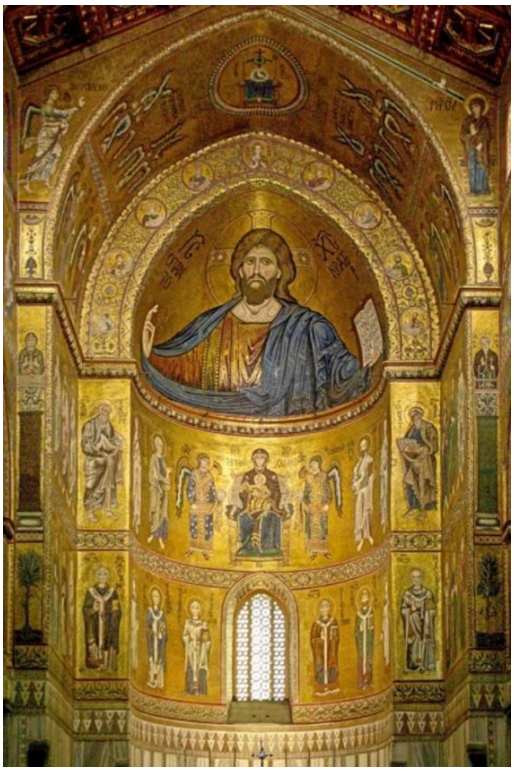


Fig 1. Cathedral of Monreale.

This was a 12th -13th century church fresco in Monreale Cathedral, Italy. The fresco faced the main entrance of the Church. The main and biggest figure in the fresco—Christ Pantocrator, was at the top of the painting, while he was also at the top of the vaulted dome. Christ Pantocrator was the depiction of Jesus, and the term 'Pantocrator' referred to 'all' and 'power'. Therefore, the painting meant that the Church had power to rule all things in the world. In this fresco, Christ Pantocrator was topmost part of the fresco, facing the visitors, with a dull but solemn vision overlooking all men. His right hand was a gesture of blessing, and his left hand held the Gospel book. This gave a strong sense of gaze. This fresco highlighted the devotion to religion, and in particular to God that was the most typical characteristic of the period in mediaeval era. In the paintings in the middle Ages, God was the centre of the world and people did not appear in paintings in most art works. Additionally, because the discipline of Jesus who were depicted were often depicted in the throes of emotions, and they were merely an appendage of God. Subsequently, the Renaissance led people to begin to imagine the idea of 'Man'. Eventually, the idea of 'Man' thrived and was expaned on during the Enlightenment period. I would like to illustrate Renaissance arts to explain this process. The subordinate relationship between God and 'Man' began to change during the Renaissance period. In this stage, it raised the awareness of 'Man' to the artists. Petrarch, often identified as the Father of Renaissance, ifor instance, wrote that man could not understand God unless man knew himself (Mazzotta, 1993). Monna Lisa conveyed some characteristics of man.



Fig 2. Monna Lisa.

This famous painting was drawn by Leonardo da Vinci between 1503-1507. Leonardo da Vinci depicted only a half-sided portrait of an ordinary woman. The woman in the painting had confident eyes, a full face and a mysterious smile; her dress was ordinary but generous. He used rich colours to express an ordinary woman. In this work, Da Vinci did not paint religion or aristocracy, and he did not imitate the likeness of God to portray man, but rather his paintings brought out man's mien and behaviour. This meant in this picture he simply depicted an ordinary and secular person, who was confident, dignified and smiling. All of this reflected the quest for the inner and outer beauty of man in Renaissance era, making man to be the centre of art works. This showed the transformation from the centre of God to the centre of man. Following the Renaissance period, the Enlightenment depicted the human group through paintings.



Fig 3. Mother of the Gracchi, Pointing to her Children as Her Treasures.

This painting was drawn by Kauffman in 1785. Currently, it is in Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. The woman on the far right of the painting held jewellery and show it off to Cornelia, who holding her children. She believed that her children were her treasure. The vibrant colours, with the unadorned floor and walls, reflected the strength of people in the painting. Importantly, this picture did not focus on one person. It paid attention to portray different people. Therefore, it was a big progress on depicting people from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment period, since the painting turned its attention to all people, such as the rich, the poor, and children. The space in which the figures move was also shifted to ordinary, mundane scenes, which shaped a world of man. This reflected the Enlightenment's emphasis on man was the centre of the world. As the concept of 'Man' was gradually reinforced, Western arts expanded the depiction of portraits to include the presentation of groups of ordinary people. Compared with the mediaeval ages, the concept of 'Man' was gradually formed and developed and expressed in artworks of the time.

3. 'Man' and 'Freedom'

During the Enlightenment period, the idea of 'Man' and 'Freedom' were in an interactive relationship. In the mediaeval period, people only knew that they had to submit to the ecclesiastical and imperial power. However, during the Enlightenment period, the term 'Freedom' meant human could do anything they want without any barriers. Rousseau (2018) indicated that man was born free. Therefore, everyone has rights to pursue freedom. Similarly, freedom was not the privilege of the despot. It was not granted to man by the ruler (Locke, 1847). Human rebelled against imperial and religious in pursuit of democracy and freedom. It informed that the French Revolution from 1789 to 1799 was the most important event.



Fig 4. Liberty Leading the People.

This painting reflected the historical event of July Revolution in 1830 which overthrew King Charles X in France. It depicted a woman carrying the banner of the French Revolution leading the mixture of social classes over barricades and fallen bodies on their way to freedom. This image reflected the people of the French Revolution rebelling against authority. According to Israel and Israel (2013), the French Revolution shaped France, for it generated the idea of new institution, democracy, and equality. The fierce resistance of the French Revolution and the pursuit of freedom and democracy of man further spread the principles of humanism the Enlightenment throughout the Western Europe and North America. However, whether the humanism of the Enlightenment period inspired the pursuit of freedom was a complex argument, as some informed that humanism advocated by the Enlightenment did not include people other than white male. It was indicated that race was born with the birth of Man (Crosson, 2021). While the universal rights and popular sovereignty of the Enlightenment flourished and prospered in Europe, the Black slave trade was accelerating. This meant the Enlightenment created the conditions necessary for the European colonisation of huge parts of the world and the rise of the Western Empire. Therefore, the Enlightenment's emphasis on universal rights and humanism did not include non-whites, women, and slaves. This was the limitation of humanism during the Enlightenment era. For instance, a vital historical event was Haitian Revolution from 1791 to 1804. It was that Haiti was colonised by France because of its rich gold resources and its suitability for sugar cane cultivation. These colonists transported Black slaves to work on the plantations. Since the humanism of the Enlightenment did not really defend the rights of slaves and non-white races, who were still oppressed on the plantations, Toussaint L'Ouverture led the Haitian slaves in their struggle to abolish slavery and give them freedom and democracy. Although Toussaint L'Ouverture was eventually imprisoned and died, in the end the Haitian anti-colonial struggle was victorious (James, 1989). Yet the French and American colonists still wanted to re-establish slavery in Haiti after independence and plunder resources such as gold. This forced Haiti to pay huge amounts of reparations in exchange for its independence and freedom (Knight, 2000). The Haitian Revolution was a challenge to the humanism, the centre of man, liberalism, and egalitarian emphasis of the Enlightenment. It proved that the Enlightenment's emphasis on the idea of man did not include slaves, women, and non-white races, thus it had the limitation on humanism. Likewise, Mintz (1965) informed that as a result of long periods of colonial plunder, Black slaves, women and non-white races in the Caribbean also wanted freedom and democracy and the universal rights highlighted in the Enlightenment. It was suggested that by the time of the Enlightenment, the Black slave trade and slavery were rooted in Western political philosophy (Buck-Moss, 2009). Because the plantation economy of the colonies supported the Western economy at the time, so for the Enlightenment and capitalism, human values and freedom would not include Black slaves, non-white races, and women. Consequently, for Black slaves, women, and non-white races they were not part of the Enlightenment concept of man. Above all, on one hand, humanism promoted some people to fulfil freedom during the Enlightenment period; on the other, the Enlightenment provided the conditions for the Black slave trade and colonial aggression, which became a limitation of humanism.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, a comparative analysis of Western artworks showed that the concept of man was developing, from the middle Ages to the Renaissance, and then to the Enlightenment. In the Enlightenment, human gradually knew what they wanted and pursue their freedom, such as they campaigned the French Revolution and the American Revolutionary War. But the emphasis on humanism during the Enlightenment ignored women, slaves, and non-white races, which had limitations, for humanism by its very nature constructed for White European male. The Haitian Revolution would always challenge this point.

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