Integration of Renaissance Arts and Hermeticism: Artful Tarot and Astrology

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Abstract. It has long been recognized that Renaissance arts can interact with some Occultism concepts, as many artists during the Renaissance could also be alchemists and mystics. Many studies based on Western Occultism nowadays are trying to explore the relationship between ethos during the Renaissance and concepts in Hermeticism, which is one of the streams of occultism. The author believed that the ethos and the concepts can be seen in some artworks during Renaissance. Consequently, this paper focuses on the relationship between Renaissance arts and Hermeticism. To demonstrate how Hermeticism impact the Renaissance arts and how Renaissance in turn developed Hermeticism. This paper applies a case study and mainly analyzes two artworks by Albrecht Dürer. The result shows that many Renaissance arts manifested Hermeticism and the impact of humanism during the Renaissance can be found in Modern Hermeticism. This paper is of great significance in the occultism study combined with art history.

Keywords: Renaissance; Occultism; Hermeticism.

1. Introduction

The importance of religion and occultism was not only recognized in the Middle Ages, but also continued to the Renaissance and the Reformation. As one of the most widely discussed brunches of occultism, Hermeticism stood out in the Renaissance, affected the artists and artworks during the period, and was correspondingly developed due to the Renaissance, with the revival of classical culture and the introduction of humanism. The name Hermeticism originated from Hermes, also known as Mercury, who is the god of communication and wisdom from ancient Greek. Hermeticism basically included studies and literature of ancient astrology, magic, mystical philosophy, alchemy, and was further related to tarot creation and divination [1]. Hermeticism can be divided into three stages, that are Hermeticism before Renaissance, Hermeticism during Renaissance, and Modern Renaissance. It is likely that Hermeticism is still important and growing popularity in a modern context, as people may see and apply some methods of sections of Hermeticism, such as zodiacs, birth charts and tarot divination. Nevertheless, not only the divination and magical practice are important, but also the essential concept of Hermeticism worth to be explored. In this paper, Hermeticism will be discussed according to the time period, as the author believed that Renaissance was influenced by Hermeticism and in turn helped develop Hermeticism.

The paper mainly analyzes the connection between Hermeticism and Renaissance arts, applying a case study of Renaissance arts that could manifest Hermetic elements. Cases include two typical woodcuts by Albrecht Dürer, who is one of the greatest artists during the Renaissance and Reformation in Germany. *Knight, Death, and Devil* could be discussed from the aspect of tarot, while *Melencolia I* is to be associated with the theory of four humors and extended theories. Additionally, Georg Penzc's collection of the seven planets Revival of Hermeticism during the Renaissance can also be covered as the background and supplement. Lastly, the development and integration of Renaissance arts and Hermeticism will be demonstrated, and the further impact they may cause will be explained, along with the introduction of Reformation and Modern Hermeticism, which can be seen as further growth.

2. Background of Hermeticism in Renaissance

2.1. The Reason for Hermeticism Revival During the Renaissance in the Historic View

Hermeticism originated from a series of ancient writings that could trace back to the first century B.C.E. It covers and combines areas such as astrology, alchemy, and philosophy, and it was also further developed to be related to tarot and magic. Based on shifting attention from the god to human beings, hermeticism was reviewed, translated, and adapted during Renaissance, and it did influence Renaissance arts. In 1471, Hermetica, one of the core Hermetic literature, was translated to Latin by Marsilio Ficino, and it is believed that Hermetica has been highly valued since the portrait of Hermes Trismegistus was found in Siena Cathedral in 1488 [1]. In historic views to look at Renaissance, the sprout of the Renaissance could be seen at the end of the Middle Ages, when there was a significant gap between noble Christian principles and society in reality that was under the control of the Church of Rome, as well as when there was the contradiction of the human nature and divinity. The situation could indicate that innovation was urgently needed, which might include gradually weakening previous religious authorities and the emergence of new ideologies that could awaken people during the period. Renaissance serves as the latter one, as it is not likely to be an antichrist or anti-Church of Rome movement. Instead, based on the existing religious system, the Renaissance places emphasis on adding elements of humanism through literature and arts that may include the introduction of early science and revival of paganistic culture, in which Hermeticism was discussed, though it is believed not to be directly threatening to religious authorities at that time [2].

2.2. Hermeticism in Renaissance

Ancient Hermeticism basically centered on the worship of a figure combined Thoth and Hermes, who were respectively from Ancient Egypt mythology and Ancient Greek Mythology. According to French scholar Faivre, Modern Hermeticism emphasizes on human potential and the relationship between micro miniatures and the macro cosmos, as it claimed that the world is flowing and a person is with goal and potential to become a higher being and to gain spiritual truth [3]. Actually, a similar humanistic concept might be seen in Renaissance Hermeticism. It is suggested that Humanists in Italy during Renaissance had already noticed that hermeticism may include opinions related to human potential [4]. Specifically, this type of opinion can be found and manifested in almost every section of Hermeticism, and this type of manifestation possibly interacted with studies that were popular in Renaissance to different degrees. For instance, Astrology as one of the sections and practice of Hermeticism, is closely associated with Renaissance medicine and autonomy, as it also has become a new study called Astromedicine in Western Europe [5]. During Renaissance, one of the most commonly seen and combined medicine and astrology concept can be the four humors, which are on the basis of a finding of four kinds of fluids in the human body and are assigned with different traits [6]. The four humors were also adopted when occultists develop tarot, and match each trait with four basic elements, which are air, fire, water, and earth [1].

3. Case Study of Hermeticism in Renaissance Arts

3.1. Albrecht Dürer

3.1.1 Introduction of the artist

Different from Western Europe, where Renaissance originated in the 14th century, Germany started this movement in the 15th century, after which Reformation initially germinated. Therefore, Renaissance and Reformation are likely to share a time period in Germany. Albrecht Dürer, who was born in 1471 in Nuremberg, one of the central cities of the Holy Roman Empire, is regarded as one of the most important artists in the German Renaissance and Reformation [7]. Besides, Albrecht Dürer also devoted himself to areas such as geometry, philosophy, religion and occultism, which is believed to have influenced his creations of art. In light of his study of occultism, humanism and

religions, elements of Hermeticism can be found in a number of his artworks. Typical examples can be Hieronymus, *Knight, Death, and Devil*, and *Melencolia I*. Besides, the artist is believed to be a Christian as many of his works are on the topic of the Christian story, and the work the Feast of the Rose Garlands by the artist is controversial as it was considered to be related to the early Rosery Brotherhood in Venice [8].

3.1.2 Tarot and Dürer' Knight, Death, and Devil

Created in 1513, *Knight, Death, and Devil* serves as one of the most widely discussed works by Dürer. According to relative studies, the tarot card DEATH interacted with other tarot cards such as the TEMPREANCE and THE DEVIL, in order to tell a story of a soul journey and an adventure and it is believed that Dürer's Knight, Death, and Devil illustrated a similar figure and story section of Tarot's story, through depict of details and symbolism [1]. Looking at the engraving, the most obvious figure is the knight on the horse, with a determined facial expression. On his side are the death and the devil. The skull on the horse in the background represents Death, who is holding an hourglass, that served as a symbol of time and mortality. It may further implicate that the knight is running out of his time, challenge and death is coming for him. On the right side of the work is the devil with a long nose and fur, sharing similar facial figures with animals. The devil is with the sickle, which the ground is on the knight's direction. Combining all signs above, it is likely that the knight is on a hard and tough path with threats of death and hardship. Nevertheless, positive signs also can be found in the scene. Firstly, there is a dog under the knight's horse, which can be symbolism of loyalty, and it also appears in the card THE LOVERS [1]. Secondly, the knight's horse is strong and keeps its head up, while the death's horse is keeping its head down. The difference between the two horses may indicate the end of the story, or it might show the artist's idealism, that the brave and persistent knight will own the triumph, complete his soul journey, and seek spiritual truth.

Compared with Dürer's work, the DEATH in Waite-Smith tarot mainly keeps general arrangements of Dürer's Knight, Death, and Devil, that the knight on a horse mostly occupied the whole scene. Differently, the knight is a skull, which is the interpretation of death. As one of the most important similarities, the DEATH is not an absolute negative sign in tarot divination practice, it shared a part of implied meaning with the Knight, Death, and Devil, that it can be regarded as an end of the current situation and a possible new start, since a human is believed to the afterlife [1].

3.1.3 *Melencolia I* as one of four humors

As suggested by Hippocrates, who is an ancient physician from Geek, the four liquid systems in the human body can be blood, black bile, phlegm, and yellow bile. They are linked to four different traits, which are sanguine, melancholic, phlegmatic, and choleric respectively, for each, traits of wet or dry, and hot or cold are also attached [6]. Further, according to the traits, four basic elements are linked. For instance, blood represents optimism, and the relative element is air, which is regarded to be hot and wet. In addition, in Hermeticism, the four humors are related to the division of astrology, that different planets and zodiacs may be linked with a kind of characteristic, as well as Tarot Major Arcana are linked to the zodiacs and four characteristics. Also, the four minor suits of tarot, which are swords, sticks, cups, and pentacles are also associated with four humors and four elements [1]. *Melencolia I* by Albrecht Dürer can be representative of works that manifest the four humors and concepts above, and it is primarily related to the black bile and energy of the element of earth, which is cold and dry.

In 1514, Albrecht Dürer finished *Melencolia I*, one of his most controversial works, and also the only engraving with a title on it. The correct spelling of the title should be "melancholy" in English, or "melancholie" in Germany, there is still a topic that is discussed if the artist was on purpose. In *Melencolia I*, the artist tried to represent the depression through facial expression and posture of the main female figure. According to the four humors theory, the associated fluid is black bile, which is regarded to be cold and dry [6]. Correspondingly, the comet in the background is believed to be related to Saturn, that is with traits of hot and wet in astrology [7]. Further, the main figure sits beside the water and wears a garland of watercress or lovage, which may balance the elements of dry and

hot of the whole scene, by adding elements of wet [9]. It shows that the artist was creating harmony and temperament in this work, applying four humors. Similarly, in Tarot and astrology, the temperament of four elements and the balance of different planets can be a positive sign or the goal to be perceived in practice. In Renaissance, temperance of emotion was seen to be a correct mixture of four fluids and humors in the human body, while the TEMPERANCE card in the tarot also emphasized balance, which may lead people to a higher spirit [1]. Therefore, it might be common that some of the artists during the period were pursuing spiritual truth based on concepts of hermeticism. In addition to the practice of four humors, some components in *Melencolia I* are also notable when focusing on elements of Hermeticism. The scene might not be organized in general, as many components and tools are arranged into the scene, however, the crucible may implicit the topic of alchemy, as one of the aspects of Hermeticism practice [10].

3.2. Additional Examples Seen As Influence of Hermeticism During Renaissance

In general, Dürer can be represented among many of artists during the Renaissance, from the aspect that hermeticism has been introduced and manifested in their artworks. Except for the identity of artists, many artists during the Renaissance also studied alchemy, astrology, and astronomy. An example can be the print collection The Seven Planets by Georg Pencz, who is also a German artist born in Nuremberg in the 16th century. The collection includes prints representing each planet such as Mercury, and Venus. Significantly different from modern astronomy, in astrology, the earth is centered by seven planets that are the Sun, the Moon, as well as Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn. The concept and opinions were widely adopted and related to zodiacs and divination through a birth chart and tarot. Starting in the late Middle Ages, the tradition of creating astrological prints and woodcuts, had been continued in Renaissance. These works are always organized with gods of the planet on the chariot. Below are people doing activities that might be considered as occupations with traits ruled by the planet [1].

4. Revelation and Further Findings of Revival of Hermeticism During the Renaissance

Revival of Hermeticism has been considered to be one of the results of a certain historic background, that the society ruled by Church of Rome, which is both a religious and political authority, is greatly different from the ideal Christian community. Under the circumstances, a movement that could radically and directly build up a new Christian society is needed. First of all, although Renaissance may not directly influence authority, it is always believed to be the basis and enlightenment of the Reformation [2]. In Western Europe, Reformation mainly happened after the Renaissance, while the two both happened and interacted with each other in Germany. It is suggested that Germany owned a deeper understanding of dark rule by the Church of Rome, since Germany was the major area to be oppressed. It may also be due to the hysteresis of the Renaissance in German, compared with Italy, where Renaissance originated from the Renaissance and the Reformation are both considered as movements that sorted out traditions, separately from the tradition of Ancient Rome and Ancient Greek, as well as the tradition of Christian. Renaissance serves as the starting point of thoughts, and Reformation may be the further action manifested, in order to innovate radically and to follow the true Christian traditions.

Secondly, Renaissance also influenced the development of Hermeticism, as the emphasis on humanism during Renaissance. The origin of Hermeticism can be Ancient Greek and Ancient Egypt, and the Hermetic Trismegistus of this system is a combined figure of Hermes and Thoth, who might be synonymous as it has been translated and spread to different regions [1]. Accordingly, it is no denying that Renaissance would closely relate to Hermeticism, as both of them are linked with the essence of classical culture and ancient wisdom. Scholars and members of religious communities during Hellenistic believed that they could channel the Hermes when they were in an inspired state. Till the Renaissance, when humanistic elements were more focused, the excessive worship of the

God Hermes became skeptical and Hermes was more regarded as the originator of paganism, who represented the origins of the wisdom of human beings [4]. In Modern Hermeticism, according to Faivre, there are six instructional qualities: the living world, the value of imagination, the idea of correspondence, the belief in transmutation, the perennial philosophy, and spiritual truth [3]. It is likely that one of the most critical concepts in Renaissance Hermeticism that the universe is the macrocosms and the human can be microcosms, impacted and gradually helped form Modern Hermeticism, which places emphasis on human potential and the link between human beings and the universe.

5. Conclusion

As the paper has demonstrated, Renaissance and Hermeticism merged and influenced each other, and it can be obviously shown in some of the arts during the period, since Hermeticism and Renaissance are both on the basis of ancient wisdom and classical culture. On the one hand, Hermeticism existed before Renaissance, but was not a mainstream study. Due to the certain historic background of dark rule under the Church of Rome, humanism and ancient wisdom were introduced and inspired some artists. It is also the time period when Hermeticism was translated and merged into Renaissance arts, which may be due to the emphasis on human potential. *Melencolia I* is closely related to the four humors theory and Renaissance medicine, which include the opinion that the human body is the mini version of the universe. The connection not only showed when looking at the appearance language, but also can be found when focusing on core concepts. On the other hand, Renaissance arts in return contributed to Hermeticism, some artful expressions can be seen in Hermeticism practice, such as the DEATH card in tarot and Georg Pencz's collection illustrating gods and the seven planets. The research also demonstrates that the connection of the Renaissance may have further influenced the Reformation and Modern Hermeticism. Many of the Modern Hermetic qualities that are about the spiritual journey and human potential can already be seen during Renaissance. The author believes that the research could serve as inspiration and supplement of similar topics in both occultism area and art history studies.

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