

Allegorical Paintings and Alberti's *Istoria*: Making the Unseen Seen

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Many paintings of the Italian Renaissance are full of symbolism and allegorical meaning. In his *Della Pittura*, Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472) emphasized the importance of *Istoria*, the concept that painting was “not to impress by its size but rather by its monumentality and dramatic content.”¹ To do this, painters should use invention and embellishment to recall themes of antiquity.² Though Alberti asserts that painters “have nothing to do with things that are not visible,³” the symbolism found in paintings such as Botticelli's *Calumny of Apelles* (1494) and *La Primavera* (1477-82), Raphael's *School of Athens* (1509), and Titian's *Sacred and Profane Love* (1514) gives visibility to the invisible in a way that contributes to the *istoria* of the paintings.

Calumny of Apelles (Fig. 1) offers dramatic content and hints at invisible characteristics of the figures through visible means. Monumentality of content is especially emphasized in this panel; it is only 62 cm x 92 cm in size, yet exudes drama. Botticelli's painting certainly exhibits classical themes, as it is his interpretation of Lucian's description of *On Calumny* by the Greek painter, Apelles.⁴ Classical architecture is also utilized with the barrel-vaulted arches. Part of the dramatic content

¹ Leon Battista Alberti, *Della Pittura*, Translated by Spencer, John R. (New Haven: Yale University Press), Introduction.

² *Ibid.*, 90.

³ *Ibid.*, Introduction.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 90.

and monumentality of the theme of Calumny, or false accusation, is emphasized by the “effective use of color and gesture”⁵ that draws the eye around the canvas. On the right of the painting, Midas, a physical representation of Greed, sits with the ears of a donkey. Ignorance and Suspicion whisper into his ear as he reaches out towards Slander. Slander is a beautiful woman in blue with the blazing torch of fury and wrath in her left hand. Leading her is Envy, a dirty man pointing up to Midas. With Slander’s other hand, she drags a young man, appealing his innocence to the gods with his hands outstretched and a glance upwards. Attending Slander are her ladies, Fraud and Conspiracy, and behind this entire group, in full mourning, the old woman Repentance glances back at Truth, naked and golden. Truth and the innocent man are the only figures not looking at the others. Not only is this painting an allegory for Calumny, but also for each of the individual vices personified who create it.⁶

La Primavera (Fig. 2), or the *Allegory of Spring*, depicts Venus in her orange grove. Likely commissioned by Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de’ Medici, this is another example of *istoria*, and its large dimensions (6’ 8” x 10’ 4”) reinforce its monumentality. The classical theme is evident with the allusion to mythology. The scene should be read from right to left⁷ and the eye moves that way naturally beginning with the angled movement of Zephyr. At the right, Zephyr, the West Wind and the first wind of spring, pursues the nymph Chloris. As he reaches her, she can be seen transforming into Flora, goddess of flowers and spring. This recalls the classical theme necessary for *istoria* as the myth of Zephyr and Flora is recounted by Ovid.⁸ The direction of Chloris’

⁵ Ibid., Introduction.

⁶ Matilde Battistini, *Symbols and Allegories in Art* (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2005), 287.

⁷ Elena Capretti, *The Great Masters of Italian Art* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 2005), 154.

⁸ Matilde Battistini, *Symbols and Allegories in Art* (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2005), 341.

transformation into Flora draws the eye towards the center of the panel to where Venus presides over the grove. The oranges themselves could be a symbol for the wealthy Medici, whose coat of arms bears the fruit, perhaps representative of the abundance of spring.⁹ Behind Venus is a myrtle bush, her sacred plant; she clothed her nakedness in myrtle after she came ashore in a shell after her birth. The goddess' tilted head moves the eye to the left where the three Graces, symbols of Chastity, Sensuality, and Beauty,¹⁰ dance. The raised hands of the Graces lift the eye upwards and to the little Cupid directly above Venus; blindfolded, his golden arrow points back towards the Graces, specifically to the middle of the three. As the viewer's gaze is drawn to her, so her gaze is upon the farthest left figure and we move with her. Here stands Mercury, considered by many to be another symbol for the Medici family.¹¹ With his caduceus, he protects the garden from the dramatically ominous clouds in the top left.

The dark trees in contrast with the lightness of the figures, in addition to the movement of Zephyr and the three Graces, further emphasize a sense of drama. There are throughout the painting a "total of five hundred species of plants,"¹² all of which add to this contrast of color that evokes such a sense of drama. This Allegory of Spring could also be an illustration of the ideal popular among the Medici and their followers of Humanitas and spiritual love, "which can raise the soul up to God and make it immortal."¹³ Venus, "that is to say Humanitas,...is a nymph of excellent comeliness,

⁹ Frederick Hartt and David G. Wilkins, *History of Italian Renaissance Art* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2007), 345.

¹⁰ Matilde Battistini, *Symbols and Allegories in Art* (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2005), 340.

¹¹ Frederick Hartt and David G. Wilkins, *History of Italian Renaissance Art* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2007), 345.

¹² Elena Capretti, *The Great Masters of Italian Art* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 2005), 155.

¹³ Matilde Battistini, *Symbols and Allegories in Art* (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2005), 341.

born of heaven and more than others beloved by God all highest.”¹⁴ She lends herself under this interpretation to be the classical equivalent of the Virgin Mary, evident by her throne like setting, and sees her dominion over earthly and divine love. This idea of Humanitas is further suggested by the carnal, earthly love/lust of Zephyr on the right in comparison with the dawning of emotional love on the left as the center Grace gazes at Mercury while Cupid’s arrow points directly at her.

Raphael’s *School of Athens* (Fig. 3) fresco, while impressive in its size (16’ 5” x 25’ 3”) gains more monumentality through its subject matter, keeping in line with Alberti’s stipulations for *istoria*. Located in the Stanza della Signatura in the Vatican in Rome, the setting of the painting with Raphael’s other frescos in the room also reinforce its power. The painting is representative of Philosophy, while the other three wall frescos represent Religion, Poetry and Law through Raphael’s *The Disputation of the Holy Sacrament* (1509-1510, Fig. 4), *The Parnassus* (1511, Fig. 5) and *Cardinal and Theological Virtues* (1511, Fig. 6) respectively. The theme of philosophy in the *School of Athens* is evident through its “culmination of the High Renaissance ideal[s] of formal and spatial harmony.”¹⁵ It also exemplifies the use of *istoria* because of the classical themes present through the architecture. This is recalled with the barrel vaulted ceilings and the Roman Doric order, which also suggest Bramante’s design for St. Peter’s Cathedral. The sculpted figures of Apollo, ancient god of the arts, and Minerva, goddess of wisdom, are visible “presiding over the assemblage” of debaters below

¹⁴ Frederick Hartt and David G. Wilkins, *History of Italian Renaissance Art* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2007), 345.

¹⁵ Frederick Hartt and David G. Wilkins, *History of Italian Renaissance Art* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2007), 524.

them.¹⁶ While not all of the figures in the painting can be positively identified, their presumed identities, as well as their placement within the fresco, are emphatic of this theme of philosophy as well as reminiscent of additional classical themes.

First, the eye is drawn by the barrel vaulting to the center figures, Plato and Aristotle, “who still today, as in the Renaissance, are recognized as the two greatest philosophers of antiquity.”¹⁷ Aristotle stands on the right, holding his *Nichomachean Ethics* that “stresses the rational nature of humanity and the need for moral behavior.”¹⁸ His hand is held out across the earth as if to “suggest the source for his observations on the nature of reality.”¹⁹ Plato stands on the left, holding the *Timaeus*, in which he recorded his philosophy concerning the origin and nature of the universe.²⁰ His figure points upward to show that his ideas are “from the realm of the mind.”²¹ The distinction between Plato and Aristotle is important to the composition of the fresco. The figures on Plato’s half of the painting correlate to philosophies of the heavens and the mind, while the natural philosophers and followers of Aristotelian doctrine find themselves on the right side.²²

In the grouping to the left of the two great philosophers, Plato’s teacher, Socrates, stands involved in a discussion, “enumerating points on his fingers.”²³ Two natural philosophers, Ptolemy and Zoroaster, hold earthly and celestial globes

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Matilde Battistini, *Symbols and Allegories in Art* (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2005), 356.

²¹ Frederick Hartt and David G. Wilkins, *History of Italian Renaissance Art* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2007), 524.

²² Matilde Battistini, *Symbols and Allegories in Art* (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2005), 357.

²³ Frederick Hartt and David G. Wilkins, *History of Italian Renaissance Art* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2007), 524.

respectively.²⁴ To the left bends Euclid, a portrait of Bramante.²⁵ He is engaged with four students, each appearing to be in a different stage of the learning process. Raphael painted himself into the far right of the fresco, his face looking out towards the viewer, and just beside him on the right is a tribute to Sodoma, the artist whose paintings Raphael was covering.²⁶ Pythagoras sits in the lower left as he “demonstrates his system of proportions,”²⁷ a philosophy of the mind. Epicurus stands behind the base of a column on the left as the bearded Zeno looks on.²⁸ However, the separation of philosophies is not strictly enforced, and the figures of philosophy are placed wherever fitting. Sprawled upon the steps at Aristotle’s feet is the Cynic philosopher, Diogenes with his beggar’s cup, isolated as appropriate to his nature.²⁹ Another isolated figure is the large, more powerfully executed figure leaning morosely against a stone block at the bottom of the fresco. This is the thoughtful Heraclitus, though he bears the face of the great Michelangelo.³⁰ Added as an afterthought, perhaps after Raphael caught a glimpse of Michelangelo’s work on the Sistine Chapel ceiling.³¹ It is interesting that he is placed on the side concerning the mind whereas Raphael places himself and Sodoma on the physical side. Although different classical philosophies are represented throughout the work with the integration of figures contemporaneous with Raphael, their

²⁴ Matilde Battistini, *Symbols and Allegories in Art* (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2005), 357.

²⁵ Frederick Hartt and David G. Wilkins, *History of Italian Renaissance Art* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2007), 524.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 525.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 524.

²⁸ Matilde Battistini, *Symbols and Allegories in Art* (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2005), 356.

²⁹ “Diogenes the Cynic,” University of Chicago, last modified May 4, 2015,

http://penelope.uchicago.edu/~grout/encyclopaedia_romana/greece/hetairai/diogenes.html.

³⁰ Elena Capretti, *The Great Masters of Italian Art* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 2005), 252.

³¹ Frederick Hartt and David G. Wilkins, *History of Italian Renaissance Art* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2007), 525.

combination aids in “illustrating the synthesis of the different fields of knowledge.”³² Collectively, the scene celebrates the “rational truth of philosophy.”³³ The groupings of the figures and the drama of their interactions combine with the classical setting and contribute to the *istoria* of Raphael’s great work.

Another allegorical painting supportive of Alberti’s *istoria* is Titian’s *Sacred and Profane Love* (Fig. 7), most likely painted for the marriage of Niccolò Aurelio. The complex symbolism throughout the painting as well as the brilliant use of color and modeling contribute to its monumentality. Though there are myriad interpretations, and the true meaning of many of the details remain “obscure or debatable, it seems evident that this is a picture about love and marriage.”³⁴ Two beautiful women, “so similar in form and coloring that they look like sisters,”³⁵ sit on either side of a fountain; the left is fully and heavily clothed in a white belted gown and gloves while the right figure is nude except for a “white scarf and rose-colored cloak”³⁶ that wrap around her delicately. Cupid leans into the fountain to “stir its waters,”³⁷ and country scenes are visible in the background behind the women; on the left side, a castle nestles into the hillside while on the right a church steeple rises.

Two theories about the women offer similar interpretations of the painting as a whole. Perhaps they are “the earthly Venus, clothed, and the celestial Venus, nude.”³⁸ The figure on the left could also be a portrait of Aurelio’s bride, Laura Bagarotto or the

³² Matilde Battistini, *Symbols and Allegories in Art* (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2005), 356.

³³ Elena Capretti, *The Great Masters of Italian Art* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 2005), 252.

³⁴ Frederick Hartt and David G. Wilkins, *History of Italian Renaissance Art* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2007), 608.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Elena Capretti, *The Great Masters of Italian Art* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 2005), 266.

“representation of an idealized bride.”³⁹ Scholars have little doubt that the nude figure is Venus, but no matter the left figure’s identity, she appears in juxtaposition with the goddess as an “idealization of earthly love.”⁴⁰ The representation of earthly and celestial love was likely inspired by Neoplatonic thought,⁴¹ similar to the idea of *Humanitas* referred to concerning Botticelli’s *La Primavera*.

The *istoria* of this painting is created in part because of its classical references, assisted by the presence of Venus, Cupid and the fountain. Bearing the arms of Niccolò Aurelio, the fountain takes the shape of a Roman sarcophagus, “its lid thrust aside” for Cupid’s hand.⁴² His presence possibly identifies it as the fountain of love.⁴³ The myrtle crown on top of the clothed figure’s head argues for her identification as another Venus; the sacred plant of the goddess it is also emblematic of marital fidelity.⁴⁴ Behind her, the castle stands as a symbol for secular love, while the church behind the nude Venus echoes the “eternal, celestial happiness and the intelligible principle of spiritual love.”⁴⁵ The contrast between the two women and the numerous symbols throughout the painting emphasize the drama and monumentality of the scene.

Alberti adamantly argued for the concept of *istoria* in his *Della Pittura*. The monumentality and drama necessary for this are created and reinforced in a variety of ways in Botticelli’s *Calumny of Apelles* and *La Primavera*, Raphael’s *School of Athens* and Titian’s *Sacred and Profane Love*. The “‘variety’ and copiousness” Alberti

³⁹ Frederick Hartt and David G. Wilkins, *History of Italian Renaissance Art* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2007), 609.

⁴⁰ Matilde Battistini, *Symbols and Allegories in Art* (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2005), 345.

⁴¹ Elena Capretti, *The Great Masters of Italian Art* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 2005), 266.

⁴² Frederick Hartt and David G. Wilkins, *History of Italian Renaissance Art* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2007), 608.

⁴³ Matilde Battistini, *Symbols and Allegories in Art* (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2005), 344.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 345.

demands of the painter extends to human poses, movements, and colors;⁴⁶ these needs have certainly been met by the paintings above. The symbolic and allegorical nature of these works allows for the unseen to become seen, and through its variety and multiple possible interpretations, still embody the *istoria*.

⁴⁶ Leon Battista Alberti, *Della Pittura*, Translated by Spencer, John R. (New Haven: Yale University Press), Introduction.

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