



European Art: Mannerism

by Joe A. Thomas

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In the visual arts Mannerism refers to the dominant style of painting, sculpture, and architecture in Europe from around 1520 to about 1600, particularly in Italy.

Characterized by exaggeration, artifice, and purposeful complexity, this "stylish style"--as John Shearman has described it--was an artistic expression of the highly refined courtly culture of the sixteenth century, while it simultaneously represented the changing status of the artist from mere artisan to educated creative spirit. It has proven to be a great favorite of gay audiences, who developed a camp appreciation for its frequent excesses.

The Term Mannerism

The term Mannerism derives from the Italian *maniera*, meaning style or manner. The exact usage and meaning of the term have been the subject of highly contentious debate within the field of art history, with some art historians such as Sydney Freedberg applying it to only a small group of artists from the first half of the century, and using alternative terms such as *maniera* and *counter-maniera* to describe other groups.

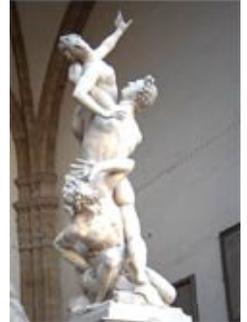
In its most common usage, however, Mannerism refers more generally to the prevalent style of European art and architecture between the High Renaissance and the Baroque. Exaggerated or elongated proportions, extreme idealization, spatial confusion, *horror vacui* (literally "fear of vacuum," a visual composition with virtually no negative space, in which every square inch is covered with something), and multiple layers of meaning are just some of Mannerism's notable characteristics.

Early Mannerists

Mannerism was most prevalent in Italy, where it was born, and among the most important and influential early Mannerists were the Italian artists Rosso Fiorentino, Jacopo Pontormo, and Parmigianino. (Interestingly, scholars have had reason to speculate on the sexual orientation of Pontormo and Parmigianino, both life-long bachelors, as well as that of the later Mannerist Agnolo Bronzino.)

Their works moved away from the highly stable and harmonious compositions of High Renaissance artists such as Raphael or Fra Bartolommeo toward more visually daring and expressively experimental works. In Pontormo's famous *Deposition* (ca 1528), for example, the space the figures occupy, as well as the very subject itself, are indeterminate and confusing, while simultaneously displaying extreme grace and elegance.

Giulio Romano, the pupil of the High Renaissance artist Raphael, designed the Palazzo del Tè (1526-1535) for the Duke of Mantua in a Mannerist style. His playful distortion and exaggeration of well-established High Renaissance classical architectural motifs is an important counterpart to the similar experiments taking



Top: The Palazzo del Tè designed by Giulio Romano.

Above: *The Rape of the Sabines* (1581-1583) by Giovanni Bologna. The image of the Palazzo del Tè appears under the GNU Free Documentation License. Image attributed to Marcok.

place in painting and sculpture.

Bronzino, Vasari, and Bologna

Later important Mannerists included Agnolo Bronzino court painter to Duke Cosimo I of Florence and his contemporary Giorgio Vasari. Vasari not only established one of the first formal art schools in the liberal arts tradition, but also was the first art historian, writing his *Lives of the Artists* for Duke Cosimo, which appeared in two editions at mid-century.

Bronzino's famous *Allegory* (from ca 1545) epitomizes the complexities of Mannerism; its allegory is so intricate and obscure as to be the subject of ongoing debate almost five centuries later.

Giovanni Bologna was the most prominent Mannerist sculptor working in the second half of the century. His *Rape of the Sabines* (1581-1583) not only displays the twisting, elongated figures and complex, tortuous compositions favored by Mannerists, but it was also originally created purely as an artistic exercise, with no specific subject in mind.

The Status of Artists

Vasari's art school and Giovanni Bologna's creation of "art for art's sake" are both evidence of Mannerism's crucial role in the history of art. Artists were no longer considered artisans, but educated, creative intellectuals on a par with poets and writers, a change of status that had already begun in the High Renaissance.

While artists had long imbued their work with meaning and expression far beyond the limitations of particular commissions, during the Mannerist period the esthetic and intellectual connotations of art came to the fore in a way not seen since classical antiquity. The highly theorized art of Mannerism set an important precedent for later art and artists.

Internationalism

Mannerism was one of the first truly international styles of western art. Italian Mannerist artistic ideals spread across Europe, both through the medium of prints and through Italian artists working in other countries.

Primaticcio helped to establish a French variant of Mannerism known as the School of Fontainebleau. Centered around the court of Francis I, it was characterized by further exaggerations of proportions, an emphasis on gracefulness, and frequent eroticism.

Northern European artists such as the Fleming Frans Floris were also heavily influenced by contemporaneous Italian styles.

The Reputation of Mannerism

Oddly enough, from the decline of Mannerism until the late nineteenth century, art historians viewed Mannerism negatively as a revolt against the much-revered art of the High Renaissance. This alleged revolt represented to many art historians an ominous creative decline in the development of art, since the idealism and harmony of the High Renaissance had for centuries provided a hallmark of artistic perfection, and Mannerism seemed so contrary to these ideals.

Even revisionist views in the twentieth century initially perpetuated this notion: the example of modern art allowed Mannerism to be seen with new eyes, but scholars such as Walter Friedländer persisted in viewing

the work of the Mannerists as a highly irrational reaction against the idealized beauty and rationality of the High Renaissance. They even referred to Mannerism as "anti-classical."

However, as later scholars such as John Shearman have explained, Mannerism was the product of a highly refined court society that valued artifice, elegance, and erudition in all aspects of culture. It was a natural outgrowth of the idealization of the High Renaissance rather than a revolt against it--that is, it was the extreme application of the goals and principles of this earlier period.

The Appeal to Gay Viewers

Mannerism in art and architecture has often appealed to gay viewers and collectors because of its exquisite refinement and frequent extravagance--tastes often ascribed (stereotypically) to male homosexuals. Certainly Mannerism's exaggerations and extremes of taste lend themselves to appreciation by viewers with a camp sensibility, and the uncertain sexual orientations of some of its practitioners is an added attraction.

Indeed, Mannerism's long rejection by mainstream art history has probably broadened its appeal to gays and lesbians, who likely identify with Mannerism's cultural marginalization.

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About the Author

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