

Hermeticism and Renaissance Art

Yiting Kong

*Experimental High School Attached to Beijing Normal University, Beijing, China
cheyennek@126.com*

Abstract: This study mainly discusses the influence of Hermeticism on Renaissance art through Italian humanism, showcasing the emergence and major focus of Hermeticism, the inheritance and dissemination of Hermeticism by humanists, and the embodiment of their ideas in Renaissance art. This study used the documentary analysis method as the research method in order to analyze information from different sources, such as the explanation of the ideological origin of hermeticism and its influences, which helps the reader to get acquainted with Hermeticism and its relation to the Renaissance in a more objective and multifaceted way. Additionally, the study delved into the symbolism and iconography present in Renaissance art that can be traced back to Hermetic principles, providing a deeper understanding of the spiritual and philosophical underpinnings of these works. By examining the intersection of Hermeticism, Italian humanism, and Renaissance art, this research sheds light on the interconnectedness of these movements and their lasting impact on cultural and artistic development.

Keywords: art history, Hermeticism, Renaissance, symbolism

1. Introduction

When modern people appreciate Renaissance artworks, their judgement always refers to the value of humanism that seem to drastically thrived during the fourteenth and fifteenth century. It seemed to many people that the Renaissance movement was such a thorough reformation of culture, with the dark period of time left behind and its occult practices completely abandoned. However, the concept that there was a radical contradiction between the Middle Ages and Renaissance is the result of Enlightenment movement in the eighteenth century, during the following centuries the proponents defamed and accused the cultural entity of the medieval period. Indeed, the Enlightenment preclude the esoteric practices from the field of science, but such knowledge was never far from the Renaissance, and was even applied on the further explanation of religion and the world, since the Renaissance humanists has inherited and explored texts of ancient civilizations [1]. The humanism thoughts encouraged them to use occult knowledge to examine situation of human as part of the universe and individual correlation with surrounding, but in what way did such knowledge represent in art? How did certain iconography link to esoteric representation? In order to get acquainted with the interrelation of esotericism and Renaissance, a retrospect to art history and the indication of symbols can provide information from another perspective. With the insight from a field that has been long ignored and declined, a comprehensive dimension of Renaissance art can be known.

2. Hermeticism

Hermeticism refers to the worship of alchemy that originated in the eastern Mediterranean region in the 3rd century BC and is said to have originated from Egyptian priests. The important figures among them were Isis and Thoth, who invented writing and protected mystical knowledge, later recognized as Hermes, the Greek god, or Mercury to the Romans. The remaining passages of Hermeticism translated by Italian humanists are only dialogues about creation, cosmic order, and the origin of the soul. The author of *Corpus Hermeticum* is revised as "Hermes Trismegistus". Obvious, it is not a real name, but a honorable title for a hidden high price in the Nile Delta, indicating that he possessed the unique skills of the ancient Egyptian god Thoth and inherited the magic of turning stones into gold from the ancient Greek god Hermes. It is said that he was an anonymous alchemist in Alexandria during the Hellenistic period, and his public identity was that of an Egyptian. Classicists infer that the foundational texts of Hermeticism originated during the Hellenistic period, prior to the Roman Empire. During the Roman Empire, certain intellectualists from Christianity and Judaism contributed to the transmission of Hermetic teachings. After the rise of the Islamic Caliphate, Muslim intellectualists also became involved in the dissemination of Hermetic texts [2]. Due to interpretive errors in which the principal ancient texts on magic were incorrectly dated, Renaissance scholars attributed Hermes Trismegistus a critical role in the dissemination of esoteric science in the ancient world, as well as a key role in the possible Christian theological justification of magic. Actually, Hermes Trismegistus' treatises contain a number of commonalities between scripture passages and Hermeticism texts, which were eventually incorporated into the medieval system of knowledge by the Church fathers. Persian astrologer Abu Ma'shar described the genealogy of Hermes as follows: Hermes Major lived in the generation before the Great Flood, the god of Thoth who guided the Egyptians in building the pyramids; The second Hermes lived in Babylon after the Great Flood; he was the Hermes who invented alchemy and mathematics and established esoteric traditions; The third Hermes is the "Hermes Trismegistus" who inherits the esoteric knowledge of the first two Hermes. He is believed to have taught not only Moses, Jews, and Christians, but also Orpheus, Pythagoras, and Plato indirectly [3].

Hermeticism was initially characterized by the worship of alchemy, hence ancient alchemy was known as Esotericism. Alchemists believe that the distillation and purification of base metals is a process that perfects matter through death and resurrection, which is consistent with the alchemist's own soul reaching perfection through death and resurrection. Alchemists believe that there is a mysterious substance called the Philosopher's Stone, which has an incredible power to turn fossils into gold. Relying on mysterious revelations from heaven, a very small number of people strive to find this "holy stone" through internal cultivation, which may be seen as "alchemy" by outsiders. In other words, in order not to attract others to imitate and cultivate their souls, the practitioners lied to the outside world that they were just looking for Elixir vitae that could prolong people's natural life. The alchemy of the Middle Ages and early modern times was rooted in laboratory procedures related to the fields of science or natural philosophy, but its transformative language coincidentally matched religious narratives about "spiritual" transformation and rebirth, implying that humans can transcend their material and sinful conditions to achieve higher states of salvation and grace. For example, from this perspective, Jesus Christ can be metaphorically referred to as the 'philosophers' stone', whose actions transform people from coarse material to spiritual 'gold'. These religious interpretations and adaptations gradually became popular after the Renaissance and flourished in the late 16th and 17th centuries.

3. Italian humanists

The scholars who were enthusiastic about compiling and translating texts of Hermeticism were exactly what people later called Italian humanists.

Marsilio Ficino was primarily a philosopher, but he was also a scholar, doctor, musician, and priest, and he had a significant and direct influence on many of the most notable Renaissance artists, including Lorenzo de' Medici, Leone Battista Alberti, Angelo Poliziano, Cristoforo Landino, Pico della Mirandola, Botticelli, Michelangelo, Titian, and Dürer, as well as an indirect influence on many more. The Medici family gave Ficino fourteen Greek manuscripts containing fragments of Corpus Hermeticum; Ficino translated these manuscripts into Latin after they were moved from Byzantium to Italy, and this collection of Hermetic texts, known as "De potestate et Sapientia Dei," quickly gained popularity in Italy and even in Western Europe north of the Alps [4]. For Ficino, man is above all a representation of God, and as such, he possesses inherent dignity and authority. According to Ficino, Plato and his followers argue that the individual soul is eternal. This is the foundation of man's divinity, and we become more like God by cultivating our souls. Ficino therefore reintroduced the Neoplatonic idea of the world-soul as the center of the cosmos and elevated the human soul to a privileged position in the universal hierarchy as the universe's tie and link between the intelligible and corporeal realms. Cultivating the soul, he believes, permits humans to "become all things." Ficino even held the opinion that, with the right resources and heavenly material, man might "create the heavens and what is in them himself." Since he is unable to, he has to accept for mimicking this world as best he can with his skills and imagination. When he received the Corpus hermeticum, he almost immediately saw the analogies between the more ancient Greek stories of creation, as well as Plato's tale in the Timaeus, the story described in Genesis, and the creation story in the Corpus hermeticum. Not unexpectedly, he came to the conclusion that they shared a same genesis. This marked the start of a mistake that persisted far into the seventeenth century and, as we shall see, was remarkably fruitful mistake that greatly influenced the development of the humanist idea. The Corpus Hermeticum made significant contributions to the development of early Christian thinking, notably the concept of God's unlimited power and freedom.

4. Influence on Renaissance art

Alchemists have utilized the image of God the Architect, Lord, and Creator of the cosmos to represent the role of the master, one who has completed the Great Work and conquered the philosopher's stone, a representation of the divine dimension concealed in human nature that has been redeemed and made operational by giving up personal selfishness and distancing oneself from worldly passions [5]. The initiated made a comparison between divine creation and alchemical labor based on this premise. The Renaissance gave universal cognitive importance to the figurative arts, a value that has also been justified by the metaphor of the divine builder. Starting from this premise, architects like Leon Battista Alberti, Filippo Brunelleschi, and Donato Bramante, as well as versatile painters like Michelangelo, Raphael, and Leonardo, achieved a fundamental reevaluation of their profession, no longer characterized reductively as a "mechanical art." In the Renaissance worldview, an architect or painter could, in reality, interpret nature like a sage or a philosopher and convert the tangible presence of the ideal form that gave birth to the work into a building or painting. They possess the same key as the Platonic demiurge, which gives life to inanimate substances like stone and colors and removes the spiritual force that penetrates creation from matter.

5. Conclusion

This study highlights the importance of interdisciplinary approaches in understanding the complexities of art and esotericism and how they influence each other in profound ways, specifically

sheds light on the interconnectedness between ancient beliefs and modern artistic processes, emphasizing the importance of examining the influence of esoteric concepts on art. Further challenging traditional notions of artistic inspiration and creation, prompting a reevaluation of the role of esotericism in the historical process

References

- [1] Thomas, Keith. *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth-Century England*. London, Penguin, 2003.
- [2] Hermes Trismegistus, & Scott, W. (1968). *Hermetica*. Dawsons Of Pall Mall.
- [3] Hanegraaff, W. J. (2013). *Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- [4] Michael Allen Gillespie. (2010). *The Theological Origins of Modernity*. ReadHowYouWant.com.
- [5] Battistini, M., Giammanco, R. M., & Getty, P. (2007). *Astrology, magic, and alchemy in Art*. Los Angeles J. Paul Getty Museum.