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The Beautiful Intersection of Art and Architecture in Renaissance Painting

Architecture and Painting – Two Interwoven Aesthetic Universes
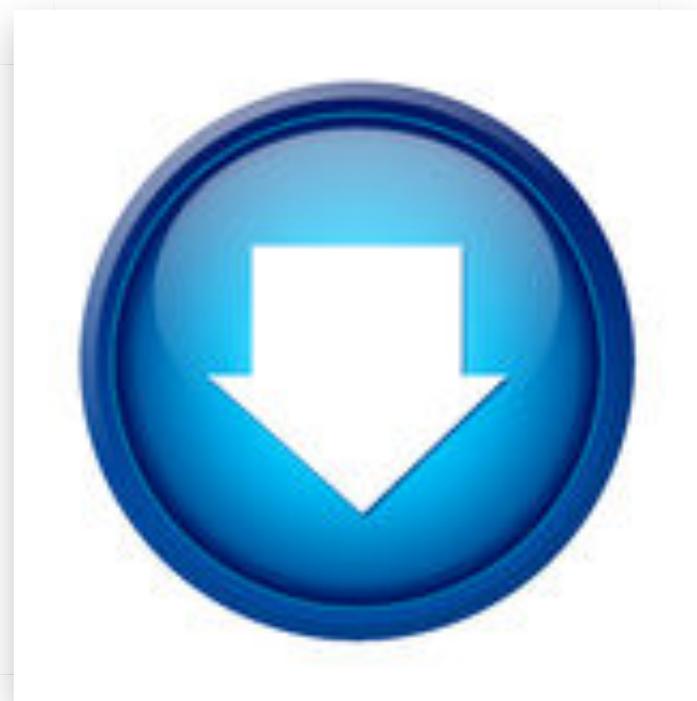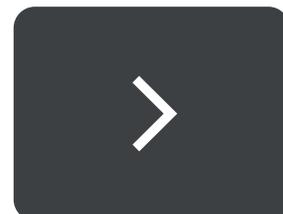
Renaissance theoreticians have given architecture a central place among the visual arts, but is there Renaissance art that has a clear architectural twist? We think of the brilliant examples of paintings where

the religious or historical subjects become an anecdotal pretext for the depiction of spectacular architecture.

Art's obsession with architecture can be traced all along the history of European art, giving birth to a genre known as *architectural painting*, where the prime focus lies on urban scenes with majestic buildings. Depth and spatiality fascinate in these works, where the mastery of perspective provides an almost photorealistic spatial impression. While many of these works depict actual cityscapes, there are plenty of examples where painters reinvent and fantasize the actual topography by adding imagined architectural repertoire to the historically documented urban environment.

Classical antiquity as well as the Bible were major sources of inspiration and we often follow the artists in their quests to reconstruct monumental mythical or historical places such as Babylon with the Tower of Babel or the Lighthouse at Alexandria. These places are romanticized and imagined as mystical ruins of cities, with beautiful and exotic arcades, colonnades and porticos. The *capriccio* became a typical 18th century genre applied for this sort of poetic blending of real and imaginary architecture. The *veduta* was another term coined for a painting of a town or landscape that was essentially topographical in conception and faithful enough to allow the location to be identified (an imaginary but realistic-looking view can be called a *veduta ideata*).The Ideal City was a programmatic topic in Renaissance art that echoed the humanist vision of the universe as divine, harmonious and based on mathematical principles. These paintings of cities should represent a utopian architectural model, a calculated ideal civic world not corrupted by trivial life and based on proportion.

I will explore three main functions that architecture plays in Renaissance painting.

The Depth: Translating Perceptual Space into Visual Space

Architecture is the making of space – a catchword that is known by everyone, who is in any way engaged with the construction industry. The difference however, between architecture and painting is rooted in the way we experience space. Architecture offers an immediate interaction with the physical, three dimensional space- a perceptual phenomenon that is inevitably translated as flatness in painting and arranged with the help of linear perspective as an imitation of depth. For the sake of mimesis, painting is fascinated by the physical space and is always trying to transcend the boundaries of its own medium, the canvass, in order to capture what is beyond its imminent flatness. It is common that the painting achieves this with the help of architecture as a pivotal structural element of the composition. Perspective operates through exterior or interior architecture, granting privilege to one and only point of view by introducing parallel lines that converge in a vanishing point and this is how we are able to perceive spatiality in painting. Perceptual space turns into visual space – and this is a transformation of brilliance.

As in the beautiful painting by **Domenico Becafummi,** *The Story of Papirius*, architecture is an active element in constructing the painting's visual spatiality through perspective.

We can literally imagine ourselves stepping into the landscape unfolding on the right hand side, walking towards the monuments, or climbing the stairs underneath the arches of the Roman senate to the left. This also frames the main anecdotal event of the narrative: the pleading of the Roman matronas for the legalization of polyandry after Papirius' lie. The painting has attempted to give us a perceptive reality of the iconic architecture of the ancient Roman setting where the story takes place, appearing as a visual space we could imagine exploring physically. Far away in the distance, we observe the crumbling ruins on the Palatine hill bathed in the horizon's mild pink air, with ancient Roman temples, a ruined aqueduct, Emperor Hadrian's mausoleum and parts of the Colosseum getting progressively small and distant. Typically, a certain blending of ancient and contemporary structures creates an architectural anachronism. The Senate resembles in fact a Renaissance loggia and the representation of the Roman monuments reveals topographical and chronological distortions.

The Frame – Creating Conceptual Spaces

The conceptual space in architecture is the mental plan developed and stored in our memory regarding the building's structure, model and features. Our mental eye creates a preliminary blueprint of the building that is rational and analytical with regards to to the construction's anatomy and specifications. The marvelous colonnades, arcades and facades gracing so many Renaissance artworks function as such conceptualizations when it comes to the painting's narrative structure. They visually constitute the narrative space of the picture and signify the ontological border that lies between physical (real) and narrative (fictional) space. This physical border is translated into a concept by the painter by applying architectural elements on the panel's sides or within the picture. The frame designates the painter's selection of the depicted protagonists, events or details, allowing the narrative to manifest itself in completeness; it sets beginnings and ends, adds secessions and rhythm to the picture, and creates the illusion of an open window (aperta finestra) before the viewer, through which they are gazing at an aesthetic universe that is coherent, harmonious bend centered.

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Thus we should not consider architecture simply an added quality with mere decorative purposes, but a conscious approach to image-making and structuring of the whole visual narrative. By including sculptural or architectural elements within the frame, artists could enhance the three dimensional qualities of their works. Very often the rich frame consisting of painted architecture served as a conceptual entity to give the narrative balance, symmetry and completeness. By articulating space through architecture, painters managed to create narrative multi-dimensionality in the form of stories within stories or by adding layers to a particular story. Architecture is one especially applicable framing device that is used as a continuous narrative for depicted events, synchronically illustrating multiple scenes taking place at different moments within a single frame. Compositions were generally arranged around framing devices such as arches, colonnades or doorways and contained marvelous architectural structures around which the events were organized. Architecture serves as a border between these multiple scenes, like in the aforementioned painting The Story of Papirius. Three different episodes – Papirius' lie, the procession of the Roman matronas and the women's pleading to the Senate are depicted together on the canvass even though they do not happen simultaneously. It is architecture that establishes frames within the visual structure and differentiates these multiple events.

In the diptych by the architect and painter Fra Carnevale from Urbino – a student of Filippo Lippi and later a Carmelite monk, **The Birth of the Virgin** (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) and **Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple** (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), we see how architectural frames segment the space into different events to form narrative and temporal layers.

The story's focal point is the bathing of the baby Maria with several maidens depicted in the middle ground. In the very background, under the arcades we see St Anna positioned in a bed and accompanied by servants. In the painting's foreground, there is a group of women with prayer beads and well-wishers ceremoniously greeting each other, and walking or riding on the left hand side. The reliefs do not only serve decorative purposes but suggest the baby's sex via a portrayal of an ancient scene with a nereid and a centaur. Demarcation points between inside and outside particular architectural structures also serve narrative purposes. It is interesting to observe how interior and exterior spaces of the particular building blend together –we still see inside a room and a building through an unrealistical frontal open space – a method, which explicitly shows architecture's role as a framing device.

In the second painting **Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple,** the façade clearly depicts events in the Virgin's life—the Annunciation and the Visitation.

The main scene evolves around the Virgin's procession and passing by a group of beggars before entering inside the temple's beautiful arcade. Fra Carnevale, being an architect himself, couldn't have resisted to portraying the intricate friezes and rows of Ionic columns that frame the inside of the church's interior. There, creating architectural perspective, the master adds layers to the scene with stairs dividing the

foreground space from the interior part, viewed through a large, classical arch.

The Scene – Translating Behavioral Space into Narrative Space

The architectural décor in Renaissance painting is a crucial component of the scene's visual orchestration. One of architecture's grand masteries is the decisive shaping of behavioral space – the space we can navigate through and utilize – a space that is performative in a sense that it constitutes a potentially dramatic realm for action. It is true that events take place, and transforming a behavioral space into a space for the narrative spectacle to manifest itself is one of the roles architecture plays in art. The space becomes part of the action; it is the main substance of the scene and being transformed into a narrative space, it is meant to be able to tell the story by its own means. Architecture is a richly informative cultural artifact with infinite narrative qualities. Masses, structures and decorations speak for themselves, enclosing and defining foregrounded spaces where something happens, with spatial articulations essential for the depicted event. This is what we call an architectural setting, where behind the apparent objectivity of painted buildings and facades, the architecture is a key element in processing sacred or political messages or designating the historical and geographical context of the scene. A figure seen in the context of its enclosing space is interpreted by the brain as a form against scenery and this is a symbiosis of fundamental significance.

The Sermon of Saint Stephen by the Viennese Vittore Carpaccio at the Louvre Museum in Paris takes place in Jerusalem and in order to the indicate the location the painter used scenic architecture.

Surrounded by the walls of Solomon's Temple, St. Stephen is situated on a ruined ancient pedestal that had

to symbolize Christianity's victory over paganism. The urban setting – executed carefully and spectacularly unfolding around the protagonist is by some historians identified to be the 16 century Damascus with its mixture of ancient Greco-Roman and Islamic architecture.

By: Sabina Karleva

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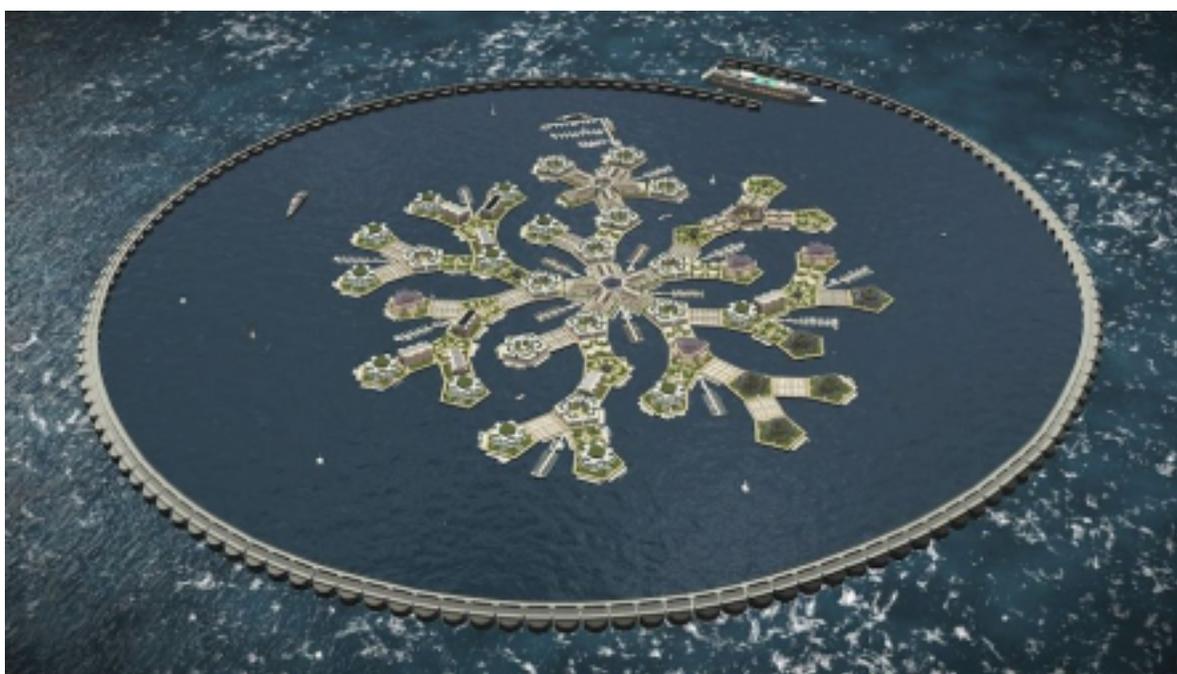
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