

UNIT 2

PERSPECTIVE IN HIGH MEDIEVAL PAINTING PRACTICE

In the eleventh century the stabilisation of the West after the barbarian hordes and the safe entry into a new millennium brought new attention to biblical stories and their pictorial representation. This began in terms of specific parts of churches such as doors (Verona, Hildesheim), and later rose windows (Reims, Chartres, Paris, York). Symbolic harmony determined the arrangement of individual elements into a coherent whole. Story telling was gradually extended throughout the entire space of the church as in Monreale and Wienhausen. These masterpieces of later medieval art were effectively symbolic *Summa* which paralleled the philosophical efforts of Hugh of St. Victor, Albertus Magnus and Thomas of Aquinas. In terms of contents, faith was dominant, i.e. Christian values. In order to relate these images more systematically proto-perspectival elements were introduced in subsequent examples, beginning with individual objects.

Relating scenes

Painters committed to representing a story with many episodes were faced with a problem of individuating the scenes. Framing them was an obvious step. However, frames could not give many clues concerning the order in which the scenes were to be read. Here proto-perspectival elements served to relate scenes while, at the same time, separating them. Duccio's *Maestà* (Siena, Museo del Duomo, 1288) offers an excellent case in point. On the back of the altar, the story begins in the bottom left hand side with Christ's entry into Jerusalem, moves to the right in an up-down sequence, then returns to the upper left hand side again criss-crossing its way to the far right. Three scenes with Christ and his Apostles (*Washing of the Feet*, *Last Supper*, and *Meeting with Apostles*) all share one type of spatial interior with beams of the ceiling converging towards a central axis. Three scenes with Caiphas and the priests occur in an interior with a type of oblique parallel projection. A similar parallel oblique method applied to an awning supported by columns connects scenes with Pontius Pilate in the bottom right and top left. In the *Maestà* proto-perspectival elements thus relate separate scenes and help us follow their sequence.

Giotto uses the same technique in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua (1304), where an oblique view of an open fronted house serves for both the *Annunciation to St. Anne* and the *Birth of the Virgin*, and where a temple with a niche serves as a continuation between three scenes: *Ceremony of the Rods*, *Prayer for the Miracle of the Rods* and *Marriage of the Virgin*. This func-

tion of relating separate scenes in a complex narrative explains why a few proto-perspectival elements become stock images which improve empirically, while other architectural elements remain spatially awkward and unconvincing. Piero della Francesca takes up these stock images in his *De Prospectiva Pingendi* (c. 1480). Barbaro publishes them in his *Pratica della Perspettiva* (1568) and thereafter they become familiar elements in the printed texts. Hence the early manuscripts and printed texts (1450-1550) on perspective consolidate and present in mathematical terms images that the tradition of painting practice had mastered empirically in the two previous centuries. Their initial role is to standardise rather than innovate.

Emphasising scenes

In the 1470s artists began to play with relating different viewpoints within a single painting. Piero della Francesca's *Brera Altarpiece* (Milan, Brera, 1472-1474) is a case in point. One views it frontally to see the context generally and then looks at it from the bottom left in order to recognise that what appeared to be an egg is actually a sphere. Holbein uses the same principle in his *Ambassadors* (London, National Gallery) and Maignan develops it dramatically in his *Saint Francis de Paul* in S. Trinità in Monte. The development of such anamorphic games further subverts the linear sequence of stories. Sometimes, perspective which developed in the context of narrative, transforms its sequence, and reduces what had been a flowing story into balanced opposition of key scenes. This is partly because perspective not only relates scenes but also emphasises them in particular ways: exaggerating the geometry of the manmade environment, drawing the viewer's eye into a spatial scene, while reducing the size of individual figures within that scene to a diminutive size. This proves inconvenient for a Christian tradition that focuses on Christ, Mary and various saints. A compromise thus ensues. Individual figures continue to dominate the main panels, while scenes relating to their lives are relegated to the predellas where key scenes are emphasised through perspectival effects. In the life of Christ these are usually the *Annunciation*, *Flagellation* and *Last Supper*. When Brunelleschi made his first perspectival demonstration, he clearly believed that the viewpoint had to be precisely in line with the central vanishing point of his picture.

Varying scenes

For art, the implications of literacy are important. In pre-literate societies a statue of a given god, inasmuch as it is often the central object that the members of a tribe have in common, defines the communality of a group. Variation is very limited because deviation from the norm can result in lack of recognition. This changes with the advent of literacy. Characteristics of a

given god, or the Deity, are known from texts and because texts now define what persons know and have in common, it is no longer necessary for the work of art to establish a sense of communality. Indeed the challenge arises of creating variants on already well-known themes. If this is true of the Bible in general, it is particularly so for key scenes such as the *Annunciation*. After Alberti's first treatise (1434), and particularly after the advent of printing in the 1450s, the process of variation increases in intensity. Some examples, such as the unknown fifteenth century painter in Santa Maria Novella continue to produce rough empirical versions. Fra Angelico makes several variants using an open colonnaded space (e.g. Madrid, Prado), thus developing a form used earlier by Nicolo di Pietro Gerini (New Haven, Yale University Collection, 1375); or another with a portico opening into a garden (Florence, San Marco), a theme which Domenico Veneziano (Cambridge, Fitzwilliam) also explores.

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GLOSSARY

rose window = rosone	awning = tendone
arrangement = disposizione	to relate = collegare
*coherent = compatto	stock = di repertorio
masterpiece = capolavoro	awkward = sgraziato
to be faced with = dover affrontare	*actually = in realtà
to frame = incorniciare	to draw (drew, drawn) into = attirare
bottom left hand = in basso a sinistra	literacy = istruzione
upper left hand = in alto a sinistra	to arise (arose, arisen) = sorgere, presentarsi
beams = travi	rough = grossolano, approssimativo
ceiling = soffitto	
*to occur = avere luogo, accadere	

NOTES

Stock in this passage has the meaning of 'conventional'. In other contexts it can mean 'supply': *a stock of paper*; 'animals': *livestock*; 'investment': *stocks and shares*.

Note the difference in spelling between noun forms and verb forms of the following words: *practice* → *to practise*; *advice* → *to advise*; *device* → *to devise*.

The texts on perspective...present in mathematical terms. Here the word *present* is a verb, but the noun form is exactly the same. The difference is in the pronunciation: *presènt* (verb) and *prèsent* (noun). Other similar words are *record, desert, rebel*.

Viewpoint means 'a place from which something is seen'. Do not confuse this with *point of view* which means somebody's 'personal opinion'.

To arise (arose, arisen) is an intransitive verb: *The challenge arises of creating variants.* *To rise (rose, rise)* is also intransitive: *Prices are rising all the time and inflation is rampant.* Be careful not to confuse these with *to raise (raised, raised)*, which is transitive and regular: *The child raised his hand to ask questions.*

They continue to produce rough versions. Here *rough* means 'approximate', 'not exact'. *Rough* can also mean 'not smooth': *The surface of the table was rough;* 'not gentle': *The man's manners were very rough;* 'not calm': *the crossing of the Channel was very rough and everyone was sick.*

The verb + adverb *to take up* in the text means 'to continue'. It can also mean 'to adopt': *He has taken up oil painting,* or 'to occupy': *Sketching is taking up all her time.* Other verb + preposition/adverb combinations are:

take away: a) subtract b) remove

take in: a) comprehend b) accommodate c) deceive d) reduce a garment

take down: a) make a note of b) remove

take on: a) employ b) undertake

take after: a) be similar to

take off: a) remove b) leave the ground c) imitate d) become successful

take over: a) assume control of something

WORD STUDY

The suffixes *-ment* and *-tion*, are added to verbs to form abstract nouns:
The development of such anamorphic games further subverts the linear sequence. *Pictorial representation.*

There can be variations with the latter:

-sion → *decision, persuasion*

-ion → *regression, discussion*

The suffixes *-er, -or* are used for jobs and social roles: *painter, ambassador.*

Exercise 1

Change the verbs into abstract noun and make a sentence.

1) *continue*

2) *argue*

3) *agree*

4) *represent*

5) *develop*

6) *vary*

7) *arrange*

8) *confess*

GRAMMAR REVIEW**NOUNS**

There are four classes of nouns in English:

- a) proper nouns (*Duccio, Verona, the West*) which always begin with a capital letter;
- b) collective nouns referring to a group of objects (*library*);
- c) abstract nouns (*harmony, faith*);
- d) common nouns (*sphere*).

Exercise 2

Put capital letters where necessary.

- 1) a dutch painter
- 2) the fortune theatre

- 5) in july
- 6) the national gallery

3) next monday

7) an egg

4) at easter

8) the house of commons

PLURALS

The plural of the majority of nouns is formed by adding *-s* to the singular form: *text* → *texts*.

Nouns ending in *-s*, *-ch*, *-o*, *-sh*, *-x*, *-zz* add *-es*:

church → *churches**glass* → *glasses**box* → *boxes*.

Nouns which end in *-y* preceded by a consonant change *-y* to *-ies*: *story* → *stories* *country* → *countries*; whereas many nouns ending in *-y* preceded by a vowel follow the normal rule: *key* → *keys*, *play* → *plays*.

Nouns ending in *-f* or *-fe* usually (but not always) change to *-ves*:

life → *lives* *knife* → *knives* *wolf* → *wolves*, but *roof* → *roofs*.

Some nouns have irregular plurals: *person* → *people* *child* → *children*.

Nouns of foreign origin may retain their foreign plurals: *medium* → *media* or may take the English plural: *predella* → *predellas*.

Some nouns have no singular form: *clothes*, and some, although plural, are used in the singular: *advice*.

Information is one of the several nouns that are countable in Italian but uncountable in English. They have no plural form and the verb that follows them is always singular: *His information is always accurate*.

The indefinite article *a/an* is never used:

*I need some information.**Have they given you any information?*

If it is necessary to specify the singular, expressions like *a piece of*, *an item of*, *a bit of* may be used: *a bit of useful information*, *a piece of advice*, *a sheet of paper*, *a bottle of wine*, *an item of news*.

Some other uncountable nouns in English are: *behaviour*, *business*, *furniture*, *luggage/baggage*, *money*, *music*, *news*, *progress*, *travel*, *research*, *work*.

Some nouns may change meaning when they appear in the plural: *compass* (*bussola*) and *compasses* (*compasso*).

A few nouns remain in the singular form, whether singular or plural:

fish → *fish**sheep* → *sheep*.

Exercise 3

With the help of your dictionary, give the plural of the following:

*basis**half**child**man**concerto**essay**criterion**datum**sheep**box**wish**city**mouse**poem**camera***Exercise 4**

Correct the mistakes in the following sentences.

- 1) Her research are going well.
- 2) Put the luggages in the hall.
- 3) The news are very interesting.
- 4) They didn't earn many money from the project.
- 5) What a modern furniture!
- 6) He's hoping to find a new work.
- 7) Researchers are making great progresses in that field.
- 8) The people at the conference is very interesting.

GENDER

In English gender is not determined by the noun itself, as opposed to Italian and other European languages. However, there are masculine, feminine and neuter forms to indicate sex: *-ess: actor → actress, -ette: usher → usherette, -man/woman: policeman → policewoman*. There is a tendency now to avoid using gender-based nouns such as the latter, so that now *-person* has replaced them: *barman/women → barperson*. Most nouns have completely different forms for the sexes: *Lord → Lady*.

Exercise 5

Say if the following nouns are masculine, feminine, or neuter:

*architect**waitress**widower**nun**artist**goddess**doctor**emperor**master**duchess**hero**queen**bride**girl**traveller*

COUNTABLE AND UNCOUNTABLE NOUNS

Nouns are divided into two general classes:

countable nouns: *window, image, value, house;*

uncountable nouns: *perspective, environment, literacy.*

Some nouns belong to both classes. Countable nouns often take on an abstract meaning when used as uncountable nouns:

Work on the chapel is continuing.

That painting is a work of art.

Space is infinite.

An open space.

Some uncountable nouns can be used as countable nouns in more formal English:

People don't understand his work.

Peoples of the world unite!

I would like some water.

By the waters of Babylon. (Biblical)

Exercise 6

With the help of a dictionary write a sentence for each of the following pairs of words, which change meaning if countable or uncountable.

1) *light / a light*

2) *tea / a tea*

3) *hair / a hair*

4) *iron / an iron*

5) *wood / a wood*

6) *glass / a glass*

7) *rubber / a rubber*
