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Art History II – Section 1304
Essay #1

Section #1

In videotape no. 3, part 1 (The Early Renaissance in Florence), the 1482 painting “Birth of Venus” by Sandro Botticelli evokes a dreamlike atmosphere centered by the Roman goddess of love and beauty. This fanciful tempera-on-canvas creation shows the west wind Zephyrus blowing Venus to Cyprus atop a large cockle shell. Greeted by the nymph Pomona, Venus is reminiscent of classical female form (nude) – an important re-emergence in the Renaissance, and symbol of baptism and rebirth.

The 1434 painting “Giovanni Arnolfini and His Bride” by Jan van Eyck are featured in videotape no. 3, part 2 (The Early Renaissance in Northern Europe). This piece, produced by layering quick-drying oils to create a pictorial aura, depicts the wealthy Italian moneylender and tapestry dealer with his equally rich wife-to-be. Arnolfini has one hand raised, the other holding hers. With symbols that portray sanctity and fidelity, the painting contains an eye-catching inscription – “Jan van Eyck was here” in Latin.

Completed during 1501-1504 by Michelangelo Buonarroti, the masterpiece “David” expresses both bravery and doubt in videotape no. 4, part 1 (The High Renaissance – Rome and Florence, the Artist as Genius). The guest narrator suggests that Michelangelo, 27 when he began work on the sculpture, may have experienced these conditions when tackling the enormous block of stone. Standing more than 14 feet high, this marble male nude demonstrates near perfection in human form, and resembles classical models.

In videotape no. 4, part 2 (The High Renaissance – Venice, Pleasure and Power), the 1538 painting “Venus of Urbino” by Titian established a celebration of marital love. Brought inside the bedchamber, the central Venus reclines while two handmaids lean over a chest. This marriage chest, a nearby myrtle plant, and a dog sleeping at the Venus’ feet demonstrate perpetuity and fidelity. Despite these qualities, the painting still demonstrates sensuality of character.

Section #2

During videotape no. 3, part 2, one can consider the “Last Judgment Altarpiece”, completed during 1444-1448 by Rogier van der Weyden. In videotape no. 4, part 1, the “Last Judgment” fresco, finished by Michelangelo Buonarroti during 1534-1541, depicts a similar scene of salvation and damnation.

The two pieces show contrast in style, in that van der Weyden’s was painted brightly to warn the sick in their Hôtel-Dieu hospital beds. By comparison, Michelangelo’s fresco seems much more serene given its blue-and-beige tone, despite gruesome images of torture and violence. A significant difference: The location of the latter, which was painted in the sacred Sistine Chapel and commissioned by Pope Paul III.

In addition, when one considers the technique used in constructing the figures themselves, the “Last Judgment Altarpiece” maintains the mundane realism that characterized art in Northern Europe during this period. They are lean, stony, and fearful. In contrast, the “Last Judgment” fresco depicts the gravity of damnation with agony and horror, yet retains the High Renaissance figurative form – curvaceous, alluring, and classically inspired.

Finally, one might notice the similarity of social commentary that the pieces display due to religious and political turmoil in Europe. The former may show influence of the outside Turkish threat to the Christian world. Similarly, the latter may exhibit the strife of the 1527 invasion of Italy that sacked Rome. These pieces embraced retribution for non-believers. Van der Weyden's, however, seems more fatalistic; Michelangelo's, more optimistic.

Section #3

Leonardo da Vinci's 1495-1498 fresco "The Last Supper" (videotape no. 4, part 1) has inspired the book and film, "The Da Vinci Code" – a creative and controversial work that has permeated the media. Although I have not seen the film, it has inspired me to think about the artist's intention compared with its current application. For example, it seems that an artist like Keith Haring, who opened The Pop Shop in 1986, had some financial intention for his creations.

The question arises, however: Would Leonardo da Vinci have embraced the hype surrounding the books and movies – even the intense speculation of purpose – centered on his work? Would he approve of the commercial purpose? And if so, what kind of activity or interest would he fund had the proceeds been his?

The type of media environment that exists for "The Da Vinci Code" makes me wonder if da Vinci might have marveled at the profound comprehension or intense misunderstanding of his creative mission. All the same, maybe da Vinci would have been satisfied to see his work evoking unexpected thought and feeling. We will find and consider thought-provoking clues – but may never really know his truth.