German Renaissance Art: History, Characteristics

The Story of Renaissance Art in Germany

A renaissance in its true sense never existed in Germany. The main reason for the fact that artistic developments in Germany did not parallel those in Italy during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries is that the German and Italian artists drew their inspiration from entirely different sources. In Germany, one important prerequisite for a *renascitur*, a revival of Classical forms, was missing: that of a Classical past to which such a movement could relate. If there ever was a renaissance north of the Alps then it belonged not to the [quattrocento](#) or [cinquecento](#) but to the upsurge of early [German Medieval art](#), at the court of King Charlemagne, when great artists and scholars were invited to revitalize the spirit of Late Classical times. But [Carolingian art](#) was in no way a new beginning, it was a fading out of Early Christian and thereby Late Classical forms and ideals. From there, German art took a different course and by turning away from Classical ideals, by creating its own, non-Classical forms, achieved true greatness. Italy never severed her link with the past and consequently her contribution to Western European art during the Middle Ages was modest. When at the beginning of the fifteenth century the medieval world crumbled, the Italians had their Classical

past to fall back on and as a result they were able to take the lead in that artistic and intellectual movement which much later became known as the Renaissance.

German artists had no Classical past to which to relate – the greater part of Germany had never even come into direct contact with ancient Roman culture – and at the end of the Middle Ages efforts in Germany were directed towards the preservation of a heritage from the most recent past.This was expressed by the continued development of proven forms. The *quattrocento*, that glorious century of Masaccio, Mantegna, Botticelli and Leonardo da Vinci, produced a last flowering of German Gothic art, known as the Late Gothic, during which period the new reality remained unrecognized. There was no radicalism in German art in this century and no bitter conflict between tradition and progress; there was a gentle merging of old and new.

As the history of art records, in Italy the Renaissance broke through with revolutionary force and met with no resistance. Popes and princes, citizens and artists competed with each other to glorify the new era and to enjoy worldly pleasures. Inspired by the artistic, moral and social freedom they unhesitatingly discarded the outworn forms of the Middle Ages and, through the revival of Classical ideals, developed a new feeling for life which found its most perfect expression in their art.

No parallel development took place in Germany. The Humanism of pre-Reformation days was erudite and serious, but lacked the youthful freshness and beautiful spontaneity that was needed to create a vision of a better future from the ruins of the past. This lack of vitality is demonstrated by the nearly complete decline of German Renaissance architecture. The few sacred structures which date from the fifteenth century (the *Stiftskirche* in Stuttgart, and the *Heiligkreuzkirche* in Gmund, for example) are products of a tired imagination. Although based on concepts of [Gothic architecture](), they lack the essential upward drive. The structures are squat, their vaults and arches broad, their pillars and ribs stocky and lifeless. The serene harmony of contemporary Italian architecture, with its balance of horizontal and vertical lines, was neither intended nor desired. These buildings express a narrow-minded piety that bears no relation to the medieval longing for the hereafter.

After the Reformation the building of churches suffered a complete decline in Germany. The Protestant part of the country was content with existing structures which, after they had been stripped of their ornaments and pictures, conformed in their spareness to the declared Protestant aim of austerity. In the Catholic south the widespread conservative attitude of the clergy may have been responsible for the fact that the adoption of Italian Renaissance concepts was not encouraged and nobody drew the architectural consequences of the

changed intellectual climate.

German Renaissance Architecture

As far as civil architecture was concerned the picture was somewhat more positive. Towards the end of the Middle Ages the growing influence of the middle classes began to assert itself against the authority of the clergy, and a number of town houses, merchants' offices and town halls were constructed. But although the secular character of these buildings was very obvious, they nevertheless failed to develop an independent style of their own. The extent to which civil architecture was dependent on sacred architecture is illustrated by the refectory of Marienburg Castle. This large hall is reminiscent of Gothic hall-churches in design and structure: a row of slender pillars divides the room into two aisles, the vault is supported by fan-shaped ribs, and pointed window arches are set into the heavy walls. The Town Hall at Frankfurt, the famous *Romer*, provides another example of this interdependence; its graduated facade is similar to that of many fourteenth-century Franconian churches.

In Italy the development of [Renaissance architecture](#) brought with it the emergence of a clear distinction between sacred and civil structures. As the individual became more aware of his importance he wanted to assert his personality in all spheres. The manner of dressing grew more decorative and sumptuous, the living habits more opulent and luxurious, and

an increased intellectual independence brought with it an interest in all branches of [decorative art](#) as well as [fine art](#). It follows that this new attitude to life demanded a more representative setting; the modest town house with its utilitarian dimensions and furnishings proved too constricting for the rich merchant or banker, and monumental civil structures began to make their appearance next to sacred structures. During the Middle Ages the former had been modelled on the latter. With the Renaissance the Italians developed an independent secular style in order to demonstrate the rejection of the omnipotence of the Church. The artless houses were replaced by magnificent *palazzi* which rich patricians now had built as a matter of course, just as the princes in the old days had constructed their castles and fortifications.

For a long time Germany and neighbouring countries north of the Alps refused to accept the intellectual, rational ideals of the Renaissance. Only Renaissance ornamentation was adopted to begin with and used for the decoration of Gothic structures. Traditional facades, terminated by pointed gables, were enriched by pilasters ending in turret-like needle-sharp obelisks that projected beyond the edge of the gable. Following Italian examples, the big rectangular windows were surmounted by segmental or triangular pediments and occasionally a balustrade decorated with figures was placed along the edge of the roof. Irregular medieval ground-plans

continued to be used, as is evident in the castle at Heidelberg, which consists of several loosely grouped structures. The old fortified castle, built around 1200, was enlarged in Italian Renaissance style by the Elector Palatine Otto Heinrich in 1556-1559. The architect, whose name is not known, used a whole range of Greek and Roman designs in an attempt to give the structure a Classical character. Ionian and Corinthian pilasters carry a Doric frieze; pediments over the windows are supported by three variously decorated pillars and carry medallions portraying Classical heroes; sculptures of figures from ancient myths are placed in niches between the windows; and on the lower storey pilasters of rough-hewn, square stone are reminiscent of the *Rustica* of Florentine *palazzi*. This confusing ornamentation has nothing in common with the clear pattern of Italian Renaissance facades. In Italy ornamentation and articulation form part of an overall architectural concept, whereas in Germany the ornamentation is in no way related to the structure, which merely supports a wide-ranging and fantastic decor.

The Town Hall at Augsburg, which was completed in 1620 by Elias Holl, is the only one among a great many Northern European civil structures that could claim to belong to Renaissance architecture in the Italian sense. The clearly conceived regularity of the square ground-plan is subdivided into rectangular state rooms on the one axis and two facing staircases on the other. In the corners of this cross, which is

formed by the state rooms and the staircases, square offices are provided for the administration. The square pattern reappears on the Facade: height and width are of equal dimension and the central section which houses the council chamber also forms a square that is framed by mouldings and pilasters. Apart from a sparing use of *cartouches* on the uppermost storey, no ornamentation decorates the facade, which is given its rhythm by the meaningful alternation of differently sized windows. Only the gable surmounting the central section represents a concession to German taste. The overall impression conveyed by the structure is one of great elegance achieved through the balanced proportions and the harmonious interplay of horizontal and vertical lines. Immediately after the completion of the Town Hall at Augsburg the Thirty Years War broke out, which brought architectural activities to a complete standstill.

German Renaissance Sculpture

A characteristic example of German Renaissance sculpture is the Shrine of St. Sebald by Peter Vischer. The work of other eminent "[Renaissance sculptors](#)", such as Riemenschneider and Stoss, was not actually influenced by the Renaissance revival of Classical forms and ideals and is, therefore, considered a last flowering of the Gothic style. Peter Vischer and his sons, on the other hand, were more receptive to new developments. From the mid-fifteenth century the Vischer

family ran a flourishing [bronze sculpture](#) foundry in Bamberg, which gained such fame that it was visited by princes and potentates from all over Europe, although important works by Peter Vischer the Elder could be found in Poland, Bohemia, Hungary, in the Palatinate and at the courts of princes everywhere in the empire. *The Shrine of St. Sebald*, destined for the church of the same name at Nuremberg, was originally designed in 1488 in purely [Gothic style](#) with a top of three crowning spires. When the monument was finally commissioned in 1507, Vischer decided to give it a more Classical aspect. The result is a strangely confusing system of round arches surmounting a dome-like baldachin, suggesting that Vischer was not familiar with current Italian forms of sculptural ornamentation. His son, Peter Vischer the Younger, created the figures of the twelve apostles; their well-balanced proportions and the solemnity of their bearing demonstrate his endeavour to overcome the concepts of [Romanesque sculpture](#). On the reliefs along the base of the shrine scenes from the life of St. Sebald alternate with half-naked figures portraying representations of Classical mythology; these are considered the work of Hermann Vischer the Younger, who is documented to have been in Rome and Toscana in 1515. Thus the *Shrine of St. Sebald* shows the gradual infiltration of Italian sculptural concepts and at the same time illustrates the incapacity of German artists to fuse these new ideas into a unified sculptural composition. Through its elongated shape and its confusing wealth of figural and ornamental details, the

general impression conveyed by the *Shrine of St. Sebald* remains Gothic.

German Renaissance Painting

Albrecht Altdorfer

The paintings created during the period of transition from medieval to modern frequently expressed that conflict between tradition and progress which predominated at the turn of the century. Albrecht Altdorfer's *Battle of Alexander* – one of the most [famous landscape paintings](#) – incorporates the most important aspects of this transitional style. A huge panorama of depth and width is presented from a high viewpoint, which demonstrates conclusively that the third dimension has been opened up to painting and that flat medieval scenes, 'sealed' by a gold sky, have become a thing of the past. A cosmic background of dramatic clouds, bizarre mountain ranges, glittering surfaces of water and scattered islands, is irradiated by the setting sun. The figurative scene stretches in an unlimited variety of gradations from the foreground to the coastline in the middle distance: a fortified town, steep rocks surmounted by castles, meadows, fields, paths and trees encircle the teaming throng of two armies, that of the Macedonian king, Alexander, and that of the Persian king, Darius. The soldiers are painted with a miniature precision that conveys their human insignificance in relation to the surrounding cosmic magnitude; this indicates an

underlying metaphysical intention but it also illustrates the current artistic endeavour to combine medieval descriptive details with the three-dimensional ideas of space developed by the Italians.

Landscapes had been portrayed in Northern European painting long before Altdorfer. They dominate the figures in a number of enchanting [illuminated manuscripts](#) from Burgundy, and the Netherlandish painters Hubert and Jan van Eyck introduced the landscape into panel painting. However, the Netherlandish school merely used nature as a background to give their pictures an impression of spacial depth and made no attempt to fuse it with the scene in the foreground. A further step in the development of landscape painting was taken by the Swiss artist Konrad Witz, who replaced the fantastic landscape by a topographically identifiable interpretation. But even his very realistic portrayals of nature such as that of Lake Geneva in *The Miraculous Draught of Fishes* are only used as a background and the theme of the painting is conveyed by the figures in the foreground.

This no longer applies in the case of *The Battle of Alexander*. Altdorfer communicates the dramatic mood through the landscape, against which the battle itself seems more an assembly of tin soldiers. Worldly events, the struggle between two big armies, are but a pale reflection of what is happening in the sky; it is here that Altdorfer conveys the conflict

between light and darkness, between day and night, between sun and moon.

Altdorfer's origins explain his close communion with nature. He was probably born at Regensburg and virtually never left his home in the wooded valley of the Danube. His best paintings are those in which he freely expresses his feelings, isolated from the art activity of his time and unhampered by the formal problems which concerned his contemporaries. He has been credited with founding the tradition of European landscape painting. By creating landscapes without figures he established an artform which has survived to this day, despite the many changes which painting underwent during the intervening centuries.

Although Altdorfer had no direct successor, his style nevertheless had a wide influence. He was the principal representative of the Danube style, a type of painting characterized by the importance of the landscape over the figures and objects. This intimate feeling for nature displayed by the Danube artists was largely responsible for their rediscovery by nineteenth-century Romantics, who regarded the Danube school as a romantic movement. Quite convincing similarities can indeed be found between the paintings of the nineteenth-century Romantics and those of the early sixteenth century, particularly in the way landscape is used to express the meaning and convey the mood of the picture.