

# Ut Pictura Poesis and the Relationship between Poetry and Painting during the Renaissance

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**ABSTRACT:** This essay explores *ut pictura poesis* as a Renaissance art theory. The main objective of Renaissance artists and art critics who promoted the theory was to raise painting to the status of a liberal art by comparing it to the honored art of poetry. Ideas linking the relationship between the arts of painting and poetry during the Renaissance formed from ancient treatises by Horace and Aristotle. The humanistic theory, popular during the Renaissance, related poetry and painting in the artist's common goal to imitate and then "perfect" or idealize nature. To show that leading artists were consciously aware of this theoretical development, I apply the *ut pictura poesis* theory to the analysis of a major work each by Titian, Michelangelo, and Pieter Bruegel the Elder.

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## UT PICTURA POESIS AND THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN POETRY AND PAINTING DURING THE RENAISSANCE

Renaissance art critics developed the theory *ut pictura poesis*—as is painting so is poetry—in an attempt to acquire for painting the level of honor that poetry had received as a liberal art since antiquity. Aristotle's *Poetics* and Horace's *Ars Poetica* serve as the ancient roots from which *ut pictura poesis* sprung to life during the Renaissance. While a more panoramic view of the relationship between poetry and painting may be strongest in the fact that they share inspiration, scholarship, and subject matter throughout history, the Renaissance view of their relationship lies in the humanistic theory of the Renaissance and the importance of imitating nature in art. Contemporary artists strive to evoke complete originality; paintings based on literature can too easily be written off as mere illustrations. In the Renaissance, artists pursued classic literary subject matter in their paintings to show their intelligence and worth as artists. The ideal painting in the Renaissance contained subject matter from classical sources and the imitation of nature. From the desire to prove that painting is as worthy an art as poetry came particular inspiration from the classic theory *ut pictura poesis*. It is an understatement to say that Renaissance artists like Alberti, Michelangelo, Titian and Bruegel, who embraced this theory, influenced countless later artists and the way our society has viewed and still views the art of painting.

This essay explores the development of *ut pictura poesis* as a Renaissance art theory developed and embraced by writers and artists in an attempt to raise the status of artists from craftsmen associated with manual labor to “thinkers” engaged in a noble profession. I extrapolate on sections of Horace's *Ars Poetica* and then apply the theory to analyses of Titian's *Rape of Europa* (fig. 1), Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* (fig. 3), and Bruegel's *Fall of Icarus* (fig. 4) to show that these artists were aware and conscious of these ideas. My purpose is to offer students of Renaissance art specifically (but also Western art of other periods) a way to understand that iconography and formal technical goals were not the only influences on how painting compositions were developed; there were also broader ideas very much at play. These ideas, or “art theories,” can sometimes seem vague or appear to be constructed by historians and critics after the fact. I will show that this was not the case with *ut pictura poesis*. The best way to understand the influence of an art theory is to apply it to images as directly as possible, which I do below. The main twentieth-century source on this topic,

by Rensselaer W. Lee, was published in 1967.<sup>1</sup> There has been little follow-up. I offer here an updated summary in which I hope to illustrate for young scholars the impact of the theory more clearly with a focus on case studies.

Because no antique treatises on painting were readily available to establish painting as a liberal art in the Renaissance, critics used literary ideas from antiquity as a basis for their argument, and thus, as a basis for *ut pictura poesis*.<sup>2</sup> The two main treatises critics used to build their argument consist of observations and comments on the art of poetry by Aristotle (384–322 B.C.) and Horace (65–8 B.C.) Aristotle and Horace only made a few direct correlations between the sister arts, but the ideologies behind their comments on poetry were eagerly applied to painting.

From Aristotle originates the most influential idea of the Renaissance, the humanistic theory, and *ut pictura poesis*: the imitation of idealized nature in art. Some Renaissance artists and critics such as Alberti, Visari, Raphael, and Leonardo supported Aristotle's idea of ideal imitation and proclaimed that painting, as Lee phrases, “rises above the mere imitation of things with direct experience to nature.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, the poet's ability to paint images of nature in the mind's eye and the painter's ability to paint the same images on canvas most closely linked the two arts.<sup>4</sup> Ludovico Dolce applies his own ideas of ideal beauty to Aristotle's idea stating that artists should use a perfect beauty as model or, if a perfect beauty cannot be found, imitate antique art.<sup>5</sup> Horace's correlation between poetry and drawing is relevant because it can be applied to painting by close association. He observes that successful poets know their subjects by observing them, as an artist would observe a live model, and/or experiencing them, as a poet experiences the spoken word. From C. H. Sisson's translation of *Ars Poetica* comes the verse, “Yet you cannot draw except from the living model / And the poet must learn to write from the spoken word.”<sup>6</sup> The fact that Horace suggests drawing from a live model in this verse directly supports the Aristotelian idea that the artist should imitate nature. Whether artists should use live models or antique sculpture to imitate nature was a topic of debate.

Horace draws two direct correlations between poetry and painting in the treatise *Ars Poetica*. The first correlation states that both poems and paintings should exude harmony in the relationship between their parts.<sup>7</sup> Horace feels both poets and painters should have the freedom, or poetic license, to create from their imagination. He notes,

however, this route often disrupts the sought-after harmony because original ideas are not often grounded in the probable and congruous necessary for harmony to occur.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, he urges artists to create from established subject matter. Horace also urges poets to exercise their poetic licenses by omitting from their poetry anything that cannot be made interesting.<sup>9</sup> Poussin echoes this idea when he says, “The novelty of painting does not consist principally in a new subject, but in good and new disposition and expression, and thus the subject from being common and old becomes singular and new.”<sup>10</sup> Seventeenth-century critic Roger de Piles compares Virgil’s ability to apply dignity and grandeur to anything he writes about to Titian’s ability to do the same in his paintings.<sup>11</sup> Renaissance critics allot to painters the same poetic license in omitting unnecessary elements in their work. Because painters must portray a story in one moment, they may alter the unity of action in the story to portray the appropriate concept.<sup>12</sup> The idea of unity of action initially comes from Aristotle.

Horace’s second correlation between the sister arts pleads for critics to allow one-time errors in poetry when there are many beauties and to view poems, as you would certain paintings, both in scrutiny and from a distance.<sup>13</sup> Horace elaborates on the idea of beauty in poetry later in the treatise when he writes poetry should contain both beauty and meaning.<sup>14</sup> The dictum from Horace, *non satis est pulchra esse poemata* (it is not enough for a poem to be beautiful), becomes a major theme in Renaissance art theory. Horace believes the arts should promote virtuous characters and ideas because of their ability to influence humanity, but the poet need not omit beauty in order to do this.<sup>15</sup> In general, Renaissance critics readily accepted the idea of beauty supplementing meaning in art because they felt the pedantry of the Middle Ages caused the passions to become “watered down.”<sup>16</sup>

Other observations from *Ars Poetica* specifically concerning poetry influenced the art of painting and development of the theory *ut pictura poesis*. Horace writes poets should apply appropriate styles to their poems based on the subject and not force an artificial relationship between subject and style.<sup>17</sup> The poet has a responsibility to know his subject and the way in which past and contemporary scholars have approached the same subject. Horace emphasizes the importance of studying the techniques of successful poets. While he feels poets should not restrict themselves to established form, he supports using the classical structures, styles and techniques of established poets when the subject calls for

it.<sup>18</sup> He writes that a successful poet becomes wise by reading the philosophies of “better men.”<sup>19</sup>

This idea can be divided into two elements: the first being the importance of classic or conventional formal elements in poetry and painting, and the second being the importance of scholarship in poetry and painting. Although there was a much stronger emphasis on scholarship, an attempt was made by some to compare their formal similarities. Some critics discuss Aristotle’s parallel of plot and words in poetry to design and color in painting.<sup>20</sup> Alberti also drew a relationship between the formal elements of poetry and painting in that geometry and arithmetic were the theoretical basis for both arts.<sup>21</sup> The importance of formal qualities and techniques to the artist, whether the same in poetry and painting or not, ties together poetry and painting in a similar goal. The second and more important idea to Renaissance critics of scholarship encouraged painters to study past and contemporary poetry, history, theology, and philosophy. This idea was especially important because it ensured that once painting had established itself as a liberal art, it would remain a liberal art. The “scholarly painter” image rendered artists intelligent and educated to their patrons and peers. Sir Joshua Reynolds bluntly writes, “He can never be a great artist who is grossly illiterate.”<sup>22</sup>

Alberti advised:

the studious painter to make himself familiar with poets and orators and other men of letters, for he will not only obtain excellent ornaments from such learned minds, but he will also be assisted in those very inventions which in painting may gain him the greatest praise. The eminent painter Phidias used to say that he had learned from Homer how best to represent the majesty of Jupiter. I believe that we too may be richer and better painters from reading our poets.<sup>23</sup>

Horace observes that the poet should use appropriate language relevant to a character’s age, occupation, and personality.<sup>24</sup> He feels that the poet’s ability to empathize with his characters and express man’s most profound concerns helped build civilization.<sup>25</sup> Renaissance critics encouraged the appropriate portrayal of characters’ age, sex, profession, status, emotions and actions within the boundaries of decorum. Along the same lines of this idea was one that painters should stick to a theological text if depicting a theological scene and to a poetic text if

depicting a literary scene. Critics also emphasized the importance of action and expression in a painting because this is what incited reaction from the viewer to the moral virtue of the painting. Many artists and critics discuss the topic and means for expression and action in art. Poussin draws upon Aristotle's doctrine when he states that the painter must provide a sense of action in his art.<sup>26</sup> He infers that a painting with drawing or color, but no action, is worthless. Inspired by Horace's simile "to smile with him who smiles" comes the idea that in order to appropriately portray an emotion, the painter must have felt the emotion himself. Leonardo writes, "the expression of human emotion through bodily movement is fundamental to the painter's art," and advises painters to study the gestures of the dumb because, as the characters in a painting, gestures are their only means of speech.<sup>27</sup>

In *Rape of Europa*, Titian depicts the scene of Zeus, in the form of a bull, abducting Europa from Sidon and carrying her off to sea. Titian knew both Tatiu's and Ovid's account of the story and used both as a guide in his painting.<sup>28</sup> He combined descriptions of color, expression, action and positioning from the two poets and incorporated them into his painting. In specific accounts of the scene, both the poets describe fictional paintings: Ovid describes Arachne's weaving, and Tatiu's describes a picture hanging in the city of Sidon. This places an interesting spin for the critic of *ut pictura poesis* because the poets write as if inspired by paintings, and the resulting poetry inspires Titian's painting. Titian paints the bull's white color, muscles, perfectly carved horns and peaceful expression from Ovid's description in *Metamorphosis*. Ovid writes of the bull:

His color was white as the untrodden snow, which has not yet been melted by the rainy south-wind. The muscles stood rounded upon his neck, a long dewlap hung down in front; his horns were twisted, but perfect in shape as if carved by an artist's hand, cleaner and more clear than pearls. His brow and eyes would inspire no fear, and his whole expression was peaceful.<sup>29</sup>

Ovid continues to describe Europa's gift to the bull, a garland of fresh flowers, which Titian also includes in his painting. Ovid returns to the image of Europa while recounting Arachne's weaving, of which a similar portrayal appears in Titan's depiction of the scene, in the prose: "The maid seems to be looking back upon the land she has left, calling on her companions, and, fearful of

the touch of the leaping waves, to be drawing back her timid feet."<sup>30</sup>

From Tatiu's *The Loves of Cleitophon and Leucippe*, Titan depicts the dolphins, distant mountains, Europa's companions on the shore and Europa's pose.<sup>31</sup> Tatiu's writes:

The color of the sea was twofold: that towards the land was tinged with red, but further out it was deep blue. And there was fashioned foam, and cliffs, and waves—cliffs that towered over the land, and foam that whitened all the cliffs, and crested waves that tumbled back in foam around them. In mid-sea a bull was painted riding upon the billows, and round it reared the waves like mountains that curved the very legs of the animal. Right upon its back a maiden sat, not across, but sideways; and her legs hung over to the right, while with her left hand she grasped its horn, as a driver holds the reins; for the gull steered rather to the left, where the pressure of her hand was guiding it.<sup>32</sup>

Titian not only depicts the landscape and positioning of Europa, the bull, and Europa's companions from Titius's text, but also uses the colors described by Titius in the red to deep blue of the sea, Europa's white kirtle and Europa's purple-red cloak.

Some Renaissance painters, such as Michelangelo, sought recognition in poetry as well as painting. His many sonnets are especially well known. Francis Ames-Lewis praises Michelangelo in succeeding in poetry almost what he accomplished in painting or sculpture.<sup>33</sup> Reynolds compares Michelangelo's style in painting and sculpture to language and, in acknowledging Michelangelo's caprice as a fault, states that, "The sublime in Painting, as in Poetry, so overpowers, and takes such a possession of the whole mind, that no room is left for attention to minute criticism."<sup>34</sup> Reynolds echoes Horace when he ignores Michelangelo's flaws because of the many beauties in his work. Michelangelo himself quoted Horace in a discussion of poetic and pictorial license given to Francisco de Hollanda and their friends.<sup>35</sup> Reynolds also proclaimed Michelangelo a great poet as a result of his abilities as a visual artist, renewing, in a sense, the traditional influence of classical texts.<sup>36</sup>

For my purpose, his verses on the last judgment will be particularly relevant in light of the famous fresco.

Michelangelo practiced Horace's poetic license in *The Last Judgment* by not adhering to the traditional composition of the last judgment. Early sketches show that he was familiar with the traditional form and considered using it but did not.<sup>37</sup> The traditional form of *The Last Judgment*, developed through several centuries, contained a more rigid sectioning between God, the damned and the blessed both in composition and specific iconography. In that tradition God sat enthroned in the center of everything showing his control and importance. Beside and above him the saints, angels and martyrs sat in an organized fashion. To God's left, the damned appeared in torment, and there is a "supernatural" imagery associated with demons. To his right, the blessed were joyful. Michelangelo still divided his piece but in a far less rigid and sectional manner. All the figures intertwine with each other in motion. The piece exudes uncertainty rather than a clear division of expression from the damned and blessed. His figures, including God, are all modeled on real human bodies and scantily clothed or nude.<sup>38</sup> Even Pieter Pourbus's *Last Judgment* (fig. 2), a later version that was influenced by Michelangelo's version, reveals the very early and lasting convention of depicting Satan and other supernatural images in "hell," which Michelangelo's version forgoes. Pourbus also organizes the piece in a more sectioned manner than Michelangelo, which is closer to how a more traditional version would look. Michelangelo portrays the ideal imitation of nature in his depiction of the human form and uses expression and action in *The Last Judgment*. The emotion portrayed may stem from his personal anxiety over his uncertainty of what his judgment would be evident in verses about the last judgment by Michelangelo.<sup>39</sup> The idea, stemming from Horace, that the artist should experience an emotion in order to depict it is supported by the emotions that Michelangelo portrays in *The Last Judgment*. Michelangelo writes of his uncertain judgment: "I see, O Lord, the eternal damnation for my sins, Committed knowingly with free will, And know not what hope there is for me."<sup>40</sup>

He writes of hope for some who will return to their beautiful state in the following verse: "Divine Braccio has assumed again his beautiful veil. He is no longer here, for ere the *Day of Judgement Pity* has taken him from earth; were he even yet buried, He still would be alone worthy of paradise."<sup>41</sup>

Michelangelo portrays the emotions of both these situations in *The Last Judgment* through the actions of his

figures. The figures to the right of Christ ascend lifting each other up and being lifted by angels, while the figures to the left of Christ descend in turmoil and violence.<sup>42</sup>

Humanistic theory did not confine itself to the Italian Renaissance but spread throughout Europe in the mid sixteenth century. The ideology behind *ut pictura poesis* was important to Northern artists as well. Bruegel's *The Fall of Icarus* incorporates elements of Renaissance theory and *ut pictura poesis* of beauty and meaning, imitation of nature (though real rather than ideal) and scholarship evident through his knowledge of Ovid's *Metamorphosis*.

Bruegel displays his knowledge of Ovid's *Metamorphosis* when he paints a partridge in *The Fall of Icarus*. The partridge alludes to several aspects of the Icarus' tale, as well as other symbolically related myths. Christopher Braider writes:

Beside the fisherman in the lower right corner is a partridge, according to the *Metamorphosis*, the reincarnation of a youth Minerva rescued from Icarus's artificer father, Daedalus, who tried to murder him as a rival. The other tale pertains, moreover, not only metonymically, as concerning Icarus's father, but typologically, adumbrating the moral lesson drawn from both stories in the emblem books where, realizing how its weight prevents it from rising in the air, the partridge "prudently nests near the sustaining earth." All of which evokes yet another typologically related tale: that of Phaeton, like Icarus an overreacher who, spurning paternal authority, flew too near the sun and perished.<sup>43</sup>

The complexity of the partridge allegory supports the idea that Bruegel harbored a strong knowledge of poetic mythology.

Although Bruegel studied perspective in Italy and was familiar with Alberti's formal method of linear perspective, the perspective in Icarus's foreground does not adhere to those exact mathematical rules. The background, however, in which Icarus falls to the sea, does contain indicators of depth and distance, scaled dimension and the sea portraying the curvature of the earth.<sup>44</sup> It is possible that Bruegel skewed perspective in the foreground to emphasize the possible forced oblivion of the peasant with the plow horse and the man fishing. In any case, Bruegel does maintain an imitation of nature true enough to the Renaissance idea in *The Fall of Icarus*. It might even

be considered more true to nature, visually, than perspective based on abstract theories to create illusion like Alberti's measured prescription. Bruegel accepts the role of "studious painter" as outlined by Alberti (see quote on p. 5). Although known as the "peasant painter," due to his place of birth and genre figures in many of his paintings, Bruegel's well-known pen drawing *Artist and Connoisseur*, suggests an understanding of humanism by an educated person in the juxtaposition of the artist and educated art viewer.<sup>45</sup> Bruegel paints many images of religion, literature and genre. He uses wit and irony in depictions of these subjects that suggest strong intellect and wisdom, as well as humor.

The strong visual imagery and narrative quality in Bruegel's *Fall of Icarus* is apparent by the influence the painting had on later poets. W. H. Auden's poem, "Musee des Beaux Arts," captures the meaning of Bruegel's Icarus. Auden uses the painting as a metaphor for mankind's reaction to suffering in the following verse:

In Brueghel's *Icarus*, for instance;  
how everything turns away  
Quite leisurely from the disaster;  
the ploughman may  
Have heard the splash, the forsaken  
cry,  
But for him it was not an important  
failure; the sun shone  
As it had to on the white legs  
disappearing into the green  
Water; and the expensive delicate  
ship that must have seen  
Something amazing, a boy falling  
out of the sky,  
Had somewhere to get to and sailed  
calmly on.<sup>46</sup>

Auden expresses the idea in his poem that even among the beauty of spring there is death. Auden captures Bruegel's portrayal of the world continuing in oblivion, or indifference, at the failure of one man's giant dream ending in death. Bruegel paints a skull in the trees above the plow horse representing *memento mori*, a reference to the immortality of man and "destruction of overreaching pride."<sup>47</sup>

Auden is not the only poet inspired by Bruegel. Bruegel also influences twentieth-century poet William Carlos Williams who wrote a collection of poems entitled *Pictures from Brueghel and Other Poems*. Williams captures the "life goes on as *memento mori* lingers" essence of the

*Fall of Icarus* in his poem "Landscape With the Fall of Icarus." He credits the relevance of Bruegel's portrayal of this classic scene by specifically referencing the artist over any other source in the beginning lines of his poem. He writes, "According to Brueghel / when Icarus fell / it was spring."

Although painting generally moved away from narrative content through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, examples of a relationship exist between painting and poetry that show Horace's far-ranging insight into the two arts. Picasso's *The Old Guitarist* (1903; The Art Institute of Chicago) inspired Wallace Stevens' poem "The Man with the Blue Guitar" (1937). Even in the postmodern era, an entire exhibition of recent works by well-known contemporary artists inspired by the poetry of Emily Dickinson was mounted in 1966 at Amherst College.<sup>48</sup>

To return to my main focus, Renaissance artists and critics recognized the importance of the relationship between poetry and painting and were to able to use this relationship to elevate painting to the honor of a liberal art. They used the antique treatises on poetry of Aristotle's *Poetics* and Horace's *Ars Poetica* as a basis for their ideologies. From this comparison evolved the art theory *ut pictura poesis*: as is painting so is poetry. Although the theory's application began in the Renaissance, the relationship between poetry and painting remains prevalent into at least the twentieth century, mainly in the shared inspiration, scholarship, and subject matter of the two arts. The most relevant relationships between poetry and painting in the Renaissance's theory of *ut pictura poesis* are the imitation of nature; content and harmony between parts; beauty and meaning; formal elements and scholarship, and expression, action and decorum. The most relevant goal of *ut pictura poesis* was to raise the status of painting to a liberal art. By understanding this, we can begin to see how carefully paintings by leading Renaissance artists were composed to relate to that idea. Virtually nothing was randomly included or included solely for visual effect. Most work included several layers of symbolism. The type of originality valued during the Renaissance was more like "invention" of specific imagery and form within certain parameters of literary contexts.

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- <sup>4</sup> Lee, 4.
- <sup>5</sup> Lee, 11.
- <sup>6</sup> Horace, *Ars Poetica*, trans. C. H. Sisson (Great Britain: Carcanet Press, 1975), 32.
- <sup>7</sup> Horace, 40.
- <sup>8</sup> Horace, 21.
- <sup>9</sup> Horace, 26.
- <sup>10</sup> Lee, 17.
- <sup>11</sup> Lee, 19.
- <sup>12</sup> Lee, 62.
- <sup>13</sup> Horace, 33–34.
- <sup>14</sup> Horace, 24.
- <sup>15</sup> Horace, 28.
- <sup>16</sup> Lee, 33.
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- <sup>21</sup> Francis Ames-Lewis, *The Intellectual Life of the Early Renaissance Artist* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 166.
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- <sup>23</sup> Alberti, in Ames-Lewis, 165.
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- <sup>25</sup> Horace, 51.
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- <sup>27</sup> Lee, 8, 24–25.
- <sup>28</sup> Laurie Schneider Adams, *The Methodologies of Art: An Introduction* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1996), 54–56.
- <sup>29</sup> Adams, 52.
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- <sup>43</sup> Braider, 78.
- <sup>44</sup> Braider, 82.
- <sup>45</sup> Christian Vohringer, *Pieter Bruegel, 1525/30–1569*, trans. Paul Aston (Cologne: Konemann, 1999), 9.
- <sup>46</sup> Christopher Braider, *Refiguring the Real: Picture and Modernity in Word and Image, 1400–1700* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993), 74–75.
- <sup>47</sup> Braider, 78, 98.
- <sup>48</sup> Susan Daly, ed., *Language as Object: Emily Dickenson and Contemporary Art* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997).

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

The source for these Images is **The Web Gallery of Art**; they are approved for educational use.

Figure 1: Titian, The Rape of Europa

185x205 cm. Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston.



Figure 2: Pieter Pourbus, Last Judgment

1551, 228.5x181 cm. Groeninge Museum, Brugge.





Figure 3: Michelangelo, Last Judgment  
1537–41, 1370x1220 cm. Sistine Chapel, Vatican.



Figure 4: Pieter Bruegel the Elder, Landscape with the Fall of Icarus  
c. 1558, 73.5x112 cm. Musees Royaux des Beaux-Arts, Brussels.

