

## Paul Barolsky Seminar Notes

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## Session with Paul Barolsky June 5, 2006

We spent most of our time today looking at great works of art and how we might link them with texts in our curriculum. Barolsky remarked that he has looked at Columbia University's curriculum as a starting point in making suggestions to Shimer for ways to integrate art into a Great Books curriculum. Columbia University's approach is to go from "spatial" analysis in early Western history to the "artist" as the main paradigm, starting with Leonardo. He recommends something similar for us, but going on to Brueghel, etc. (In general he doesn't recommend Baxandall for young students.) He reminded us that the emergence of the idea of "the artist" happened "a minute ago" in the scope of the history of art – it is merely a good/messy 500 year old "problem" that results from the fact that there are biographies of Leonardo: using them is a good way into the modern period, since these texts allow for interesting epistemological discussions. In this vein, he recommends George Eliot's Romola on Renaissance Florence.

Barolsky commented that the core curriculum limits how things can get done at Shimer, so he suggests Shimer faculty be flexible regarding what students will learn. Don't expect to do "art history", but focus on "looking" and getting students interested in the works themselves. Using our Socratic method we can do this without having to become experts. He is not fond of textbooks, but William Fleming's Art and Ideas is the best guide. It's small, and its approach is through the history of ideas. We then viewed and discussed many great works of art, many in conjunction with literary texts/poems which we had read in preparation for the seminar. He strongly urged us to link poetry with paintings; this will help our students relax as the approach works of art.

We began with the Parthenon and the Apollo Belvedere. Barolsky mentioned how we might link this with Plato's criticism of art in The Republic. He pointed out that Plato's criticism of the project of realistic art could be discussed as a reaction against sculptures like the Apollo.

We looked at a number of images of the Pazzi Chapel of Brunelleschi in the cathedral of Santa Croce in Florence. The ceiling of the Chapel was a representation of the Heavenly Jerusalem. He talked about the value of studying architecture and specifically how we should take advantage of what our new location in downtown Chicago will offer us.

Chartres, of course, is also an option. He recommends Panofsky's Architecture and Scholasticism (Hegelian), as well as Henry Adams' on "The Virgin and the Dynamo" (Chapter XXV of The Education of Henry Adams for study in this context. Likewise, Vincent Scully, The Earth, the Temple and the Gods: Greek Sacred Architecture, along with works by Vasari, Winckelmann, Kant, and Pater.

We spent a substantial amount of time looking at and discussing Botticelli's "Primavera". We discussed the story of the image and what is known about the story and provenance of the image. He emphasized the extent to which Ovid's poetry is visual, and how Botticelli "metamorphizes" Ovidian stories into Renaissance imagery. Barolsky's commented on Botticelli's *Primavera* alluded to a larger set of literary references than most others we viewed. The Rosetti poem is a great avenue for getting into something historical, the Fanthorpe poem ("Not my Best Side") on Uccello's "St George and the Dragon" can illustrate Vasari's commentary, and thus one begins to unpack the connections. Barolsky suggests Dante as a great source for simultaneously discussing art and literary texts: the Brueghel/Auden (painting/poem connections on the fall of Icarus) continues this method, as do the other contents of his anthology, and of course, Balzac's "The Unknown Masterpiece."

Some general comments on the nature of the Early Renaissance included the following: it was a period when artistic self-consciousness was on the rise, and there was a love of the decorative, like tapestries that "weave together" architecture, poetry, philosophy. Barolsky thought it would be interesting to see what *Primavera* might mean to Helsing in terms of the idealization of Florentine hegemony, a Golden Age; one could also study the painting in terms of symmetries of various kinds.

Barolsky gave us a fair amount of background about the "Primavera". Some of the themes of our discussions of this painting and "Venus and Mars" included: carnal/spiritual love; Christian/pagan themes; spirituality; musical nature of the paintings; sculptural elements of the figures; beauty; what do you know and what do you infer about the paintings?; sensuality of nature; Golden Age; classicism/modernity.

Citing Vasari on Botticelli, he noted that Botticelli "flourished" in the Golden Age of the Medicis (Florence/lor/flourish); his Venus is the "Golden Venus" of the Medicis in many ways. He stressed that Botticelli is of course very important to Michelangelo. As regards key texts, he repeatedly emphasized Vasari, Dante, and Balzac. He was particularly interested in discussing the ways in which this and other images commented on literary sources. Of particular relevance for this work was the story found in Ovid. We talked about some contemporary literary sources related to the image; and then we discussed several poems inspired by the painting.

Botticelli prepared illustrations for Dante's Divine Comedy. Barolsky emphasized that they were not simply illustrations but were a commentary on Dante; the images engage in a dialogue with Dante's text. The images were a reading, a commentary, a visual poetry in response to Dante's creation. We also looked at Botticelli's "Venus and Mars" and discussed how it conveyed its story.

We next looked at many images of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling. We concentrated on the section of "The Creation of Adam". We discussed various ways of thinking about the entire ceiling, its principles of organization and its graceful groupings of form. He emphasized how important it is to point to and note the obvious things about an image even if their significance is difficult to articulate. This discussion focused particularly on the depiction of God: he's held up by angels, suggestive of the "gravity/gravitas" of God.

We thought about whether God is stretching/even straining to reach Adam; this is hard to substantiate in the affirmative, but the general pose “magnifies” God, as does the cape/shape behind him and his angels. The ornamentation adds amplitude.

God’s finger is rarely discussed, but in one Biblical narrative, there is mention of God’s finger, and in another, mention of God’s Spirit at the moment of the creation of Adam. Paul suggests that this Finger= Spirit connection is later used textually by Augustine, Boccaccio, and others. This parallels the artist’s hand (creator) painting God’s hand. Also, God’s wind-swept appearance suggests spirit, zephyr.

Michelangelo asks you to ponder the various meanings of spirit/inspire/breath: similar bodies (his and Adam’s), but God’s is animated (with Spirit) while Adam’s is not yet. Nearby water reminds us that God is inspiring the world – the spirit was upon the waters. By the position, Michelangelo is asking the viewer to compare the two figures. Corinthians 1:15 -- rewriting of Genesis. Corpus animalus/corpus spiritalae – Trinity present. (Akin to baptism of Christ). Note the figures around this scene: two angels, two brutes. Their bodies mirror the twists and curves of the main figures. He recommended Charles Seymour’s work on the Sistine Chapel (Norton Critical Anthology) as an excellent guide to this work.

### Session with Paul Barolsky June 6, 2006 Part I

We continued viewing “great works of art” with much discussion of how we would want to present materials for discussion with our students. We spent more time with different sections of the Sistine Chapel.

**The ceiling:** Barolsky recommends Charles Seymour’s work on the Sistine Chapel (Norton Critical Studies in Art History) as a good text. He suggests the ceiling’s narrative structure is rather simple. The Biblical narrative - Adam and Eve on to Noah on to God alone - suggests sinful humanity’s movement toward God on high. There is also an allegorical reading that implies the separation of light and dark that runs in one direction, while the Biblical narrative moves in the other. Note all the acorns: these were an emblem of the Pope at that time. They suggest genealogy/tree of life/ family tree/etc.

Looking at the individual scenes:

**The Flood:** note the green tree and the dry tree and cross references to Luke 24 that evoke Christ at Calvary – tree/cross; life/death. He sees in this scene an allegory of the Last Judgment, people dead in sin after the Fall. Michelangelo appropriates the language of Jesus to women on Calvary to describe judgment. (see Luke 24).

**A Sybil:** serpentine torso, holding a book, ideal of a simile of her seeking wisdom/enlightenment as God separates the light from the dark. Seymour book is very useful here.

**The Last Judgment:** “Sol Justiciae” (sun imagery)

Dante’s “Minos” (Infernal Judge) is in this painting. This Minos has donkey ears, recalling Midas, another judge from Ovid. Witty conflation. Note the figleaf – a serpent is gnawing at the figure’s genitals – another joke on the censorship of nudes.

Other works we viewed with reflections on using them in the classroom:

**Pieta:** It can be fun to ask students why it is famous. The mother is larger than son, Mary looks young; Vasari describes it beautifully, speaking of how her pain, pity and grief come alive in the dead marble.

Virgin, spouse, daughter and mother: Bernard's prayer in Dante's Paradiso calls Mary the mother and daughter of Jesus -- seems that Michelangelo is alluding to Dante here, and to the tradition of Marian spirituality as such.

**David:**

Cf. Machiavelli's Prince p. 85, re: David and Goliath. David refuses the arms of a mercenary; so maybe Michelangelo's statue had inspired Machiavelli?

**The Last Supper:**

Perspective converges on Jesus who is talking about bread and wine and betrayal. Note the ambiguity about the meaning of his words, which gives rise to various reactions by other figures, each of which is a "verb": rationalize, emote, panic, etc. Note the geometry and harmony in the placement of the figures, four groups of three.

**Mona Lisa:**

Portraiture as theme: Ovid/Pygmalion, statue coming to life, says Vasari. Look at this in a series of portraits and see Pater. One could use Freud's text on Leonardo for a psychological interpretation. The viewer becomes the subject of her gaze, which is completely different from other portraiture. Vasari says she's like a secular Mary; he says Leonardo had wanted to cheer her up so he gave her this particular smile. Evidently there were jesters there to crack her smile, according to Vasari – all of this is rather improbable, but vaguely possible! Gioacando is her husband, so he calls her "La Giocando." Her smile is the "emblem" of her identity.

**Raphael's frescoes:** on the library walls of Pope Julius II. All the theologians united in the Eucharistic celebration. Dante is there, and he's elsewhere too – among the poets. This is a very interesting orchestration between Platonism, poetry, and theology: all are pointing to same transcendent God, and there is a strong impulse in these works toward a unity of form.

**Session with Paul Barolsky  
June 6, 2006  
Part II**

Paul Barolsky summarized some of this morning's discussion of Michelangelo and suggested some writers on Greek and Roman art and architecture whose work we might want to study: Mary Beard, Jeffrey M.Hurwitt, Vincent J.Bruno. Rhys Carpenter.

We spent the afternoon looking at slides. We began with Raphael, looking at the works on the walls of Julius II's library. The frescoes illustrate great authors and great books.

Barolsky said that he tells his students that, to really understand these frescoes, they would need to spend their four years at University of Virginia reading the Great Books. We followed the analysis of Raphael's work by reading part of Vasari's description of Raphael.

*The Disputation* – Theology – Properly understood, the title does not indicate argument, but the reconciliation of opposites. In the work, we see the hierarchy of earth and heaven with increasing levels of abstraction on ascending. On the lowest realm, centered on (or perhaps, united by) the Eucharist, great theologians are shown, with some readily identifiable. While Giorgio Vasari claimed to be able to identify all of them, moderns cannot, though some are clear to any careful observer. For example, Augustine wears a bishop's mitre and has a book titled "City of God" on his lap. Dante's image is a copy of others that were common at the time.

*Parnassus* – Poetry – Apollo is seated in the center at the top of the hill. This frame has significantly more women, beginning with the muses surrounding Apollo. Sappho is readily identifiable, as is the blind Homer. Dante is again identifiable, with Virgil beside him. Apollo looks to the sky while playing, suggesting the music of the spheres. Vasari's description of the painting celebrates its nobility, accuracy, and its mimetic qualities. This is a common theme of Vasari's and seems to be a real goal of Renaissance painters: the ability to mimic and then transcend the visual aspects of the subject.

Barolsky suggested that we consult writings by Christiane L. Joost-Gaugier who relates Raphael's painting with the actual authors and great works.

*The School of Athens* – Philosophy - This one, known by almost everyone, has Plato and Aristotle in the center, with Apollo and Athena standing as statues in niches. Apollo looks out of the painting, across to himself on the other wall of Parnassus. The members of the school are grouped to the right and left, with thinkers such as Pythagoras and other Pre-Socratics grouped with the mystical Plato, and Euclid and Ptolemy with the more analytical Aristotle. Some figures are easy for us to identify, but with others we are clearly only guessing. It's fun and fine to do so but it is important to remember that we do not know for certain, and probably never can know, who some of the figures are.

Finally, there is a fourth wall representing Law, but it is in poor condition and we did not view it.

We then moved on to a pastoral from the School of Giorgione that is now thought to be done by the young Titian, yet perfectly in the Giorgione style. The subjects in the figure are similar to Vasari's description of Giorgione himself. The key in such pastoral paintings is to capture both the slow passage of time and the action in the scene, yet to capture it in a way that holds it as an unchanging part of the eternal, thereby arresting the moment forever.

Barolsky then shifted from viewing and analyzing well-known paintings to looking at pictures that specifically mimic mythology. The examples he chose were from Ovid.

For example, he showed some of Michelangelo's sculptures, generally referred to as *The Slaves*, rough and unfinished images of the captives of Julius II. Vasari said that we can see the perfection to which Michelangelo aspired inside these figures.

The Medici family acquired the images and they were used to illustrate the Ovid story of Deucalion and Pyrrha. Barolsky suggested that Ovid himself seemed able to appreciate the image of the unfinished statue since he described it so well in the Deucalion story. Michelangelo's pieces were not created to illustrate Ovid, yet they came to be used in that fashion, continuing the Renaissance tradition of using art to mimic the Classical period.

Barolsky then showed several examples of the Apollo and Daphne story. The most memorable was the statue by Bernini, done with great grace and fluidity, which captures the bark beginning to envelop Daphne's legs and abdomen while her toes take root and her arms lengthen and break into leaf. The look of surprise on Daphne's face freezes her shock while maintaining the action and motion of the moment at the very instant when Apollo grabbed her by the hip.

Barolsky used this as an example of the Renaissance ideal of the artist who transformed the poetry of words into the poetry of paint or sculpture.

A modern example of this would be Kiki Smith's sculpture *Daphne*.

As long as we were on the topic of Bernini, Barolsky showed *The Rape of Persephone*. The similitude to real figures is striking, even in the depressions made by Pluto's hands on Persephone's thigh. The statue effectively shows the tears of the maiden, which further mimics the story of Andromeda who was turned into a statue but still able to cry, allowing her to be freed after Perseus saw her tears.

Barolsky also showed several example of the Juno and Io story. The most gripping and amazing image in this group was Caravaggio's depiction of Jupiter as cloud. Io sits, sensuous and smiling, a willing victim to Jupiter who reaches around her waist and envelops her as a murky, brownish gray mist. Under examination, the cloud is clearly alive, with hints of hand and face suggested in the gloom.

We also examined two paintings by the lesser-known artist Pieter Lastmann: 1) Juno surprising Jupiter in the act; and, 2) Juno with Iris transferring Argus' eyes to the peacock.

In addition to the painters' attempts to transform poems into visual images, there is a tradition of poets attempting to transform pictures back into the written word. While most of this poetry is poor, some is notable. For example, Brueghel's painting of the fall of Icarus captures the story of that tragic figure from Ovid, while Auden recaptures the story back into words in his poem "Musee des Beaux Arts," as does William Carlos Williams in his poem "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus."

## Session with Paul Barolsky June 7, 2006

Paul Barolsky began with some general advice that we should not worry about “getting to the bottom” of any great work of the visual arts. He also noted that much useful information on specific works can be found in the “History of Art” available on line.

We looked at Pater and Vasari as examples of how biographical anecdote has been used to explain and interpret the life of an artist. We looked at a variety of narrative structures and the importance of the oral tradition in these accounts.

We spent a substantial amount of time following out how stories from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* have been represented in art. We spent a lot of time on Velazquez’s “Arachne”. Ovid’s representation of artists and his playful forms of self-reflection in his work suggested interesting ways of thinking about the tradition of self-portraiture. We looked at images by Moreau, Rembrandt, Velazquez, David, Reynolds, Delacroix and Rodin.

We discussed Balzac’s short story “The Unfinished Masterpiece.” Paul talked about the historical world Balzac creates and how he placed Romantic concerns in the seventeenth century. Cezanne identified with Frenhofer; he brought tears to his eyes. We’re dealing here with the cult of the artist; there is a demonic/frightful side to viewing the artist in this way and we see this in Frenhofer. In particular Barolsky described how Balzac adapted the romantic ideal of the ‘masterpiece’ into his fictional world. He talked about how the idea of the masterpiece became an obsession in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It might be interesting to look at Rodin’s work in this regard. We talked about the numerous novelistic representations of the demonic creator. Picasso also identified with Frenhofer; for a while he lived in the same house. Artists are constantly trying to “outdo” previous artists, a theme captured in this story. The idea of the heroic masterpiece is of course passé today. Why Poussin? In 19<sup>th</sup> century France he was a great hero of French art, a source of national pride. The history of art can be viewed as a nationalistic enterprise, and Poussin represents the greatness of France.

Perhaps appropriately we concluded with a discussion about forgers. Barolsky recommended Eric Hebborn’s book – you don’t know what to believe and what not to. It’s a great read.