Unit 4 Reading Guide: The production of culture

In this unit we turn from the politics and society of the Italian Renaissance to the cultural achievements that echo down to the present. Our goal is to place those achievements in their political and social settings. We have addressed some aspects of the production and consumption of culture in passing; they will now receive our direct attention. We begin with the production or recruitment of artists and writers, and then turn to the demand for art by patrons, clients, and courts. We then look at what art meant in the Renaissance and examine how historians can figure it out.

Essential questions for this unit

- Who produced culture?
- Who consumed culture?
- Whose values were reflected in culture?
- How did culture legitimate institutions?
- How should historians use cultural products as historical sources? What do they tell us, and what should we beware of?

Paper topics for this unit

The following paper topics are suggestions; if you would like to define a different paper topic, you are welcome to do so. See the paper guideline handout for more details.

1. Renaissance artists and critics often claimed that the goal of the arts was the imitation of nature. Based on Leonardo’s and Vasari’s texts, Burke and Martines, and the paintings and sculptures reproduced as figures in Burke and Martines, what did “imitation of nature” mean for Renaissance artists, and why was it important? You may wish to visit the Art Library (Du Bois Library, 9th floor) to look at more detailed color prints of some of the art. (Books on the 9th floor do not circulate.) If you use as evidence a painting or sculpture that is not reproduced in Martines or Burke, please include a photocopy with the paper. Many online art archives have reproductions of Italian Renaissance paintings (e.g. the Artchive and the Web Gallery of Art, both linked from the course home page). These can be useful, but they are not always as detailed as necessary for a careful analysis.

2. Burke claims that the artist was, in many ways, a social deviant in the Renaissance. What does this mean? How is the artist’s social deviancy related to the cultural, social, and political uses of art in the Renaissance? Is there a similar pattern with writers?

3. Discuss the usefulness of the term “art” as a general concept for understanding Renaissance cultural history. In what settings would Renaissance people have encountered works of art? Was the esthetic value of art the most important aspect of it for Renaissance viewers? Did the answers to these questions change between the late fourteenth and early sixteenth centuries?

Thurs. 10/24: Artists and writers

Read: Burke, 43-88 (ch. 3); Reader, 185-195, 382-393 (Leonardo da Vinci: selections from the Notebooks; Vasari: selections from Lives of famous artists).

1. How does the creative elite of Renaissance Italy compare with the general population in terms of sex, place of origin, and parents’ social standing? Does Burke presume that artists and writers came from a more talented subset of the population than others? If not, how does he explain the concentration of artists and writers in a relatively limited social milieu?

2. What institutions were associated with art? How were artists educated, and how did artists make a living? What status did they have in society?
3. What institutions were associated with literature? How were writers educated, and how did they make a living? What status did they have in society?

4. Burke writes that there were “two cultures” in the Italian Renaissance: practically-trained artists with little Latin learning and university-educated scholars. What does the existence of these two cultures suggest about how classical themes entered painting and sculpture?

5. Did the education and social status of artists change during the Renaissance? What about writers? In what way were creative individuals “social deviants” in the Renaissance? Are there similar patterns today in the way creative people are considered by society?

6. How did Leonardo da Vinci deal with the fact that many contemporaries considered artists lowly because they were uneducated? What role does “experience” have in his reflections on art?

7. What talents did Leonardo claim for himself when he applied to the Duke of Milan for a job? Where does painting fall in the list?

8. Why did Giorgio Vasari emphasize the nobility and antiquity of painting, sculpture, and architecture? How, according to Vasari, were the arts related to nature?

Tues. 10/29: Patrons, clients, and courts
Read: Burke, 89-124 (ch. 4); Martines, 218-240 (ch. 12); Reader, 197-207 (Castiglione: selection from The book of the courtier).

1. What are the five systems of patronage that Burke identifies? Which ones were present in the Renaissance?

2. What were the advantages and disadvantages of princely or noble patrons? Of religious organizations? Of communes or republics? Of keeping shop and producing for the market?

3. What motives did patrons have for commissioning works of art and literature? Why did patrons’ and artists’ wishes sometimes clash, and what outcomes were possible?

4. How large were Renaissance courts? What kinds of people formed members of the court establishment? What would it have been like to be an artist at a Renaissance court?

5. What is the connection between the culture of spectacle in Renaissance courts and the demand for painting, sculpture, and architecture in the Renaissance?

6. Based on Castiglione’s book, what kind of person was a courtier? What was court life like? How did courtiers pass their time? How does Castiglione’s portrait compare with Martines’s account?

Thurs. 10/31: The meanings of art
Read: Burke, 125-144 (ch. 5); Martines, 241-276 (ch. 13).

1. What religious functions did works of art serve? In what religious settings would Renaissance Italians have encountered art?

2. What political functions did art serve? Was it purely propagandistic—i.e., intended to promote a specific policy of a regime? Was it ideological, intended to portray the best possible face of its political patron or patrons? How did iconoclasm convey a political message?

3. What private uses did art serve?
4. Does the category of “art” serve as a general concept to unite all these different uses? Would contemporaries have recognized it as a category, or is it anachronistic to lump together altarpieces, private portraits, and public statues as “artworks”?

5. “The critical point in the sociology of art centers on the way in which artists convert social experience into a figurative language” (Martines, 249). What does this mean? What do we learn about Renaissance society by studying the artistic styles of the period?

6. What patterns does Martines identify in the development of Renaissance artistic style? How does he explain them? What is the social meaning of space in Renaissance art, according to Martines?

**Tues. 11/5: Taste and iconography**
Read: Burke, 145-177 (ch. 6-7).

1. What terms did Renaissance Italians use when describing paintings and indicating their preferences? What trend in taste does Burke identify over the course of the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries?

2. Why were young painters sometimes advised to put a “completely affected, mysterious and difficult” figure in their works (Burke, 154)?

3. Decorum and imitation were two key concepts in Renaissance literary criticism. What did they mean? Looking back on some of the literature we have read, both Italian (e.g. Petrarch, Boccaccio, Alberti, Vasari) and Latin (e.g. Petrarch, Bruni, Fedele, Poliziano), can you find examples of decorum and imitation?

4. What objections were made by opponents of the Renaissance in arts and letters? What do those objections imply about how Renaissance Italians understood the power of artistic representation?

5. What is iconography? What problems of evidence and interpretation does a historian encounter when attempting to analyze the iconography of a Renaissance work of art?

6. Compare Leonardo’s painting of *The Virgin, Child, and St. Anne* (Burke, Plate 32) with the description by Pietro da Novellara of a sketch of the subject by Leonardo (Burke, 172). What significance did Brother Pietro see in Leonardo’s treatment of the subject? Is that how you initially interpreted the picture?

7. Burke claims that religious themes in art would have been familiar to most viewers, whereas secular themes were more difficult to interpret. Why? What does this imply about the social penetration of Renaissance culture? What were the limits of the interest in and knowledge of antiquity?

8. How does Burke’s account of the developing style of Renaissance art compare with Martines’s? To what extent does each author see artistic style as autonomous, and to what extent is it determined by political and social structures?