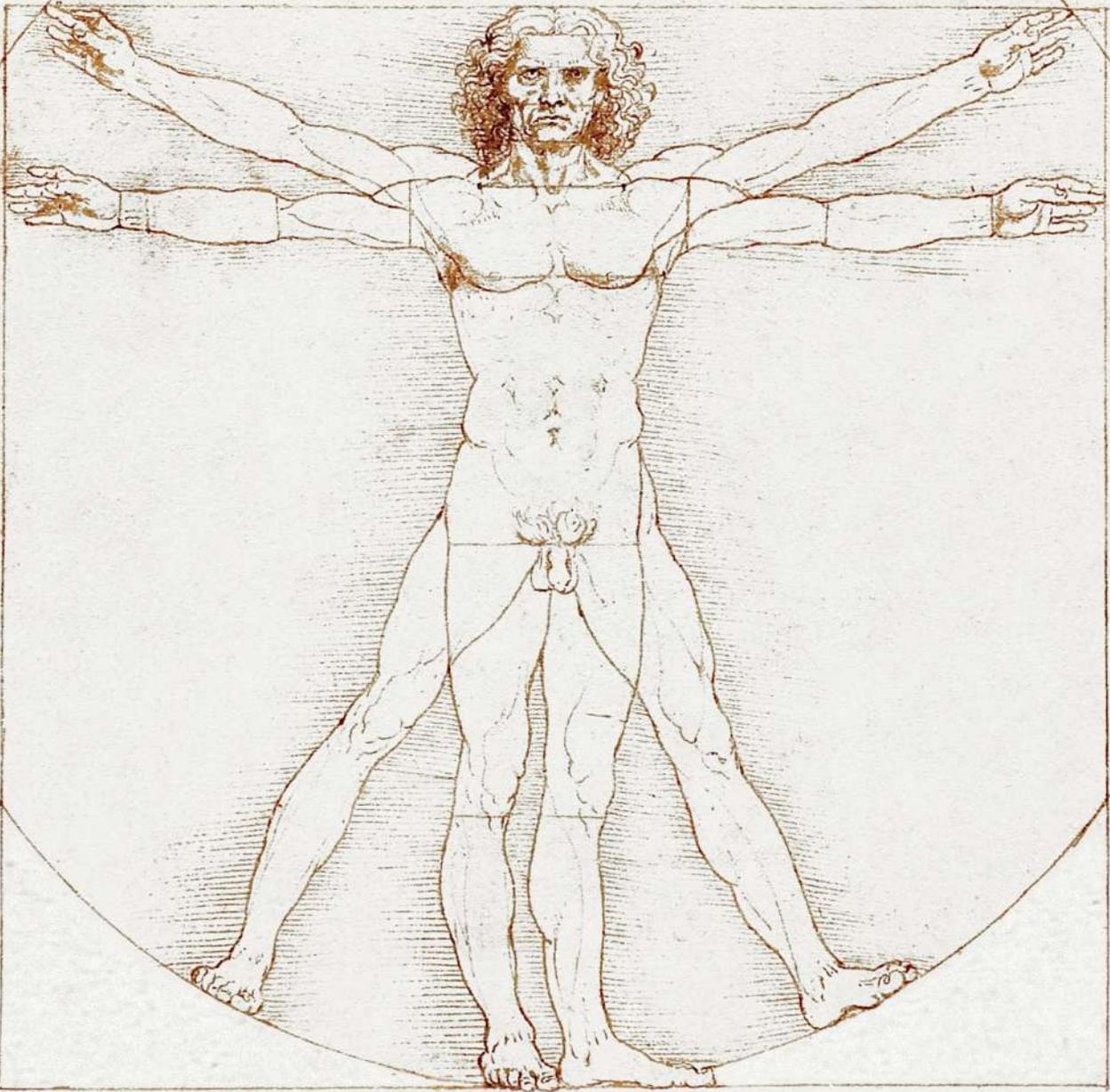


# The Acropolis

Philosophy for today



March 2022  
Issue 9

Spring Edition    The Italian Renaissance: Philosophy, History, Science, Art and more!



16 week course

# Philosophy for Living

Inspired by Philosophies of East & West



## What is The Acropolis?

In ancient Athens the Acropolis, literally meaning the High City, was the place which supported the highest ideals of the people. The founder of New Acropolis International, Professor George Livraga, chose this name to capture the key objective of philosophy; that we as individuals build a new high city within, that we discover the heights of our own potential, so that we may externally build a new high city, a new and better world, together. The Acropolis magazine is motivated by this objective and aims to share inspiring content, combining all the major endeavours of philosophy, art, science, education and culture.

## About Us

New Acropolis is an international organisation working in the fields of philosophy, culture and volunteering. Our aim is to revive philosophy as a means of renewal and transformation and to offer a holistic education that can develop both our human potential as well as the practical skills needed in order to meet the challenges of today and to create a better society.

For further details please visit: [www.acropolis.ie](http://www.acropolis.ie)





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## Editorial: A New Renaissance For Our Time

The Renaissance was a time in which old systems that had been very useful for the development of the human being, in all its aspects, were revitalised. Today we can investigate what would be the perfect ingredients for a new rebirth.

The word rebirth/renaissance is truly beautiful. Conceiving it in a thought, reading it in an art book or writing it in an intimate reflection, produces an internal movement. This impulse of the soul makes elevated thoughts emerge, bringing us closer to the archetypal ideas of the Good, Justice, Kindness and Truth. It seems to be a magical word that runs through the deepest currents of the human soul. Once awakened and enchanted by such a magnificent verb, the soul longs to seek its origin, that great light from which it started, the sublime idea of the ultimate Good. Marsilio Ficino, Renaissance Neoplatonist, could not express it better: "Everything proceeds from the Good and is directed to the Good."

Renaissance, renewal, humanism, immortality, individual freedom, love, beauty. These concepts and words take on a relevant value within the Renaissance ideological universe. Ideas that in every time and place of history have led to periods of cultural, social and moral prosperity. Wonderful words that men and women had the courage to make their own despite living under state or religious oppression, words that will inexorably continue to promote rebirths because they are timeless.

Any renaissance as an historical movement is not spontaneous. Perhaps, its manifestation through an artistic and cultural emergence may seem so; however, it has followed a process of cause and effect. In periods of darkness there have always been wise people who protected those seeds of wisdom containing lasting ideas. Through their efforts those seeds could germinate with strength and vitality in the human soul during periods of light which we call renaissance.

The Italian Renaissance is the closest to our time. It has left us artistic works of incomparable beauty in all its aspects: painting, sculpture, literature, architecture, etc. Works which do not leave anyone indifferent. How did they come to connect their art with Beauty so faithfully? What ideas awoke the genius of these great artists? We know that many of them were educated in philosophical academies, such as Boticelli, who acquired philosophical education in the Neoplatonic academy of Florence directed by Marsilio Ficino. The doctrinal pillars of these schools were the Hermetic and Platonic philosophies.

Timeless philosophy, once again, constituted the essence that vitalised the great Renaissance movement of the arts and sciences. They reinvented the concept of humanism, giving the human being limitless creative capacity, by using their imagination. They fused this creative potential with their own will, foreign to divine designs. This philosophical background permeated the soul of

Renaissance people and prompted them to be reborn internally and express it externally.

Perhaps the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, temporary foundation of this wonderful period, are far away in time. However, this philosophical energy continues to irrigate the hearts of many people in our time, it continues to revive the souls of people who love and act to make possible new rebirths.

We can all be renewed internally; it is not necessary to wait for great cultural or artistic changes. Let us begin today to be, as the humanist philosophers used to say, the masters of our lives and the architects of our destinies. Let's begin to assume that we are an integral part of a world in which all things are interconnected and, consequently, we are also responsible for its evolution. Being reborn inwardly is not something abstract, it is an attitude that seeks and strives to integrate values in the human being through an active participation of our potentialities.

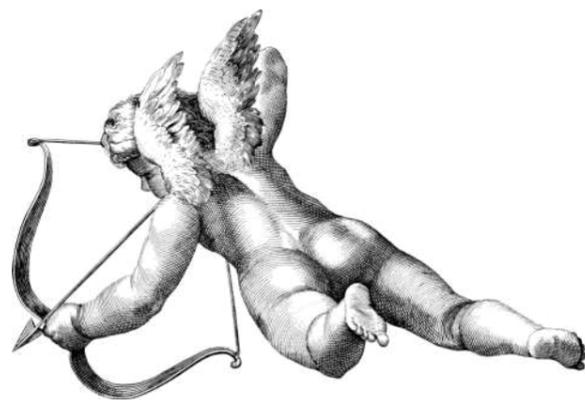
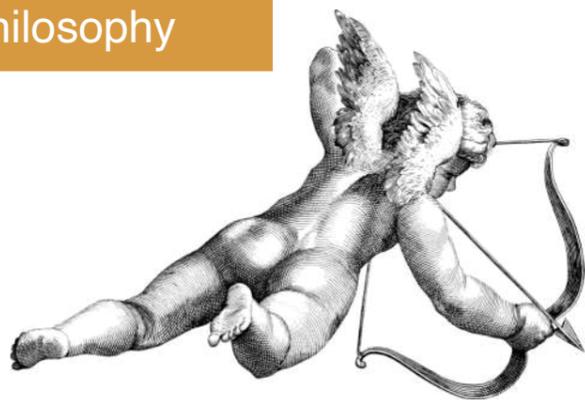
To be reborn in the day to day, is to open our eyes every morning with the purpose of taking advantage of any circumstance that arises to improve ourselves. It is to smile, offering honest advice, or reaching out to a troubled heart. It is dispelling the fog of fear and uncertainty that overshadow our ideals. It is abandoning passivity and conformism, it is courageously facing adversity, it is shaking off personal selfishness.

Enthusiasm, solidarity, generosity, compassion, conviction, security, strength, commitment, determination, effort. These values are the translation in action of everything mentioned above. This is the true meaning of an inner rebirth: the understanding and living of timeless and lasting values.

The Renaissance philosophers, Marsilio Ficino, Giordano Bruno, Pico della Mirandola, Tommaso Campanella, Nicolas de Cusa, etc., knew how to adapt ancient teachings to their time, embodying the human being who forges themselves. In this adventure many were misunderstood and they paid the ultimate price for being freethinkers. They proclaimed that the human being has immense faculties that can be developed to search for reconciliation with the universal order, culminating in the contemplation of the intelligible world.

They put forward that we occupy a central place in the world and that we must be an active and responsible part of history. This is the Renaissance legacy, which has transcended time, which has not been distorted, imprisoned or burned, because it resides in the most sublime part of the human being, the soul; that which seeks perfection to achieve immortality.

Alain Impellizzeri  
Director, New Acropolis Ireland



# I Wanna Know What Love Is

## What can the Renaissance show us?

Diving into the world of the Italian Renaissance, the word 'philo-sophia'; the love of wisdom, captures the attention of any investigation. How different this meaning is compared to "knowledge through science" that has become a guiding motto of our age. The more one discovers about this period of history, the more it becomes apparent that the driving force of the Renaissance genius was the love of wisdom. A pursuit which revitalised all human activity (arts, science, politics and religion) without exception, suggesting a significance of developing an inclusive vision of the world.

We live in a world that praises tolerance and freedom of thinking but yet does not cultivate an eclectic approach. We understand the importance of inclusiveness, yet are challenged by the diversity of human worldviews and approaches to knowledge. Perhaps that's why we are astounded by the beauty of the Renaissance spirit: it was at the same time scientific and religious, artistic and political, and above all philosophical.

Plato says "Love is born into every human being; it calls back the halves of our original nature together." This love of wisdom that unites apparently opposing parts is perhaps something we need to understand well today. Let's see why the Renaissance vision was inspired by everlasting love of wisdom and not by endless rationalisation and intellectualism.

What was driving a philosophical search towards the mystery of human existence and the cosmos? It could be understood as a process of reimagining oneself and a world that is guided by love. It makes sense to first think of "love" in terms of this driving force that pursues and leads us to the whole, in line with Plato's definition.

We could say that the Renaissance spirit was not so much interested in fitting the whole world in a rationalistic point of view. This was rather a remit of Scholasticism, another school of thought of the time. The Renaissance spirit was seeking a love that expands the spirit within the framework of the divine.

In one of his treatises about human nature, Pico della Mirandola asserts that to arrive at perfect knowledge of that which is essential, we need to turn our attention to

the first world (i.e. the intelligible world or world of archetypes). What does this mean? To gain wisdom, we need to learn to see the world through the eyes of the soul. Ideas can't only be "thought of", they must be experienced with the heart and mind in daily life.

It's true that we connect with the world with our external senses, but to renew the human being, the wisdom of the Renaissance reminds us that we need to converge to our inner senses, in order to guide our external ones. This conversion frees an infinite force, Divine Love, that according to Mirandola "let[s] us enter into our very selves, into the inner chambers of the soul."

As human beings we have two organs of sight. One is guided by our external senses and is directed towards the sensory world (or "the second world") and the other by our inner faculties and is directed towards the intelligible world (or "the first world" of Mirandola). In the Greek Myth of Akestis this union between the soul and the intelligible world, is symbolised in a loving kiss or "bacio". This kiss is the mystical union between the lover (the soul) and the beloved (the intelligence).



The Farewell of Admetus and Alcestis by George Dennis (1848)

According to Renaissance thinkers, that which allows us to penetrate the mystery of the cosmos and our own mystery, is not our intellect, but capacity of love. It is the faculty of Love or Intuition that lifts the veils from the world. It is that divine, boundless, pure love that Plato says inspires our search for unity between the human being and gods. It is that love and intuition that will allow us to comprehend the unity beyond the multiplicity and



Giovanni Pico della Mirandola

patiently discover, one by one, a relationship between things.

It is this mystical faculty of love that empowers the human being to break down all illusory walls of separation. It is that infinite force that brings us to a humble realisation that we are not complete, and yet generates the strength to become more complete. Through love the whole world transforms as with love we see what's essential.

This pure and courageous love, capable of letting go of anything unessential, creates an opening of the soul. Love is the activity of the spirit that elevates and allows us to perceive the essence, the archetype of Beauty in the human being, the world and ourselves.

The art of developing inner perception is to turn our gaze inwards, by ascending towards the intelligence of the timeless and freeing ourselves from the impressions of the external senses. Pico della Mirandola represents turning our gaze inwards with an image of bringing all five rivers of the senses in one place under the heavens. That is, under common sense, that which Aristotle placed in the heart. Once we are able to master our senses under the intelligence of the Self, we can let them nourish our body like five Mediterranean seas, as Mirandola notes.

Love as the 'intelligence of the heart', was a key motif in Renaissance life and an ideal that was to be practiced in daily life. This ideal or archetype was symbolically represented by the blindfolded Cupid, who represents love which is blind to all external appearances and illusions. To

*Love is born into every human being; it calls back the halves of our original nature together.*  
- Plato

see the unity beyond multiplicity (divine knowledge) the soul has to rise towards the angelic or total intellect that will inform the soul through symbols.

Here the imagination is born, the force of inner perception that can see the potentiality of the future, thus making it possible today. "To imagine 'according to Nature' is nothing other than to have the power of symbolisation." says Francoise Bonardel. Imagination is the realm of the Self, not of the rational mind. Our partial intellect, or rational mind, frantically trying to make reality and the world tangible by its own tools, misses the essence unless illuminated by Divine intellect.

Imagination is capable of seeing beyond desire and is not fantasising. As the soul ascends towards the intelligible world, it forms "figurae" or symbols, opening itself to a greater vision of life. While we start from the abstract, but fixed and universal, we arrive to the concrete, living, personal. "Every virtue of the heavens... is conveyed to earth by the vehicle of light. Every virtue of the Soul ... through the medium of the luminous Spirit" - Pico della Mirandola.

It is fascinating that the words that feel so familiar to us, like "love", carry an incredible depth when lived, tested, and used as guides in our daily life. The Renaissance spirit invites us to scratch the surface of ideas, to engage with life and deepen our experience and relationship with others and the world we live in. What is the purpose of love, or more precisely, love of wisdom? To overcome "doxa" (which in Greek means "opinion", "belief") and to arrive at "dianoia" (in Greek meaning "Sun" or "thinking"). The Renaissance reminds us of an ancient truth, that our will may be free but it cannot judge or love what it does not know. The objective of philosophy is to learn to know the true nature of things, events, life, and ourselves, with both head and heart. What is it all worth if we don't know how to love?

Ivona Ward

# Hermes Trismegistus

## An Egyptian Sage's Influence on the Italian Renaissance

Ancient Egypt today and in antiquity was considered a place of mystery and wisdom. The philosophers Pythagoras, Plato and others visited Egypt and it is thought they were instructed in its ancient knowledge. So when a manuscript was brought to Florence in 1462 AD and was thought to be a copy of Hermetic writings from the ancient Egyptian sage Hermes Trismegistus it caused a great stir.

In Europe at the time the world of Christendom was languishing in a stagnant period of Scholasticism. As Mircea Eliade explained about the new interest in Hermetic texts:

“One can decipher in this phenomenon the profound dissatisfaction left by scholasticism and the medieval conceptions of man and the universe.”

When Cosimo de Medici, patron of the arts and humanism, was told about the discovery of this manuscript he instructed Ficino, his chief translator, to set aside the translation of Plato's writings and to translate the texts of the Corpus Hermeticum.

The author of the Corpus Hermeticum was the legendary figure Hermes Trismegistus who, according to a number of scholars at the time, including Ficino, was a contemporary of Moses. Ficino considered him to be the source of the *prisca theologia* or “ancient wisdom”, which asserts that a single, true source of knowledge existed and was drawn from a common divine source. It gave a new vision of the human being, a new relationship with the cosmos and with the ancient works of Plato and others, igniting a new flame in the Dark Ages of Europe.

Hermes Trismegistus is attributed to a number of mystical, philosophical and initiatory texts commonly referred to as the Hermetica. In that time there were two main currents of Hermetic tradition in Europe. One was based on the writing of the Corpus Hermeticum, and had its home in Italy, spreading throughout the rest of Europe. The other was based on the Tabula Smaragdina, also called the Emerald Tablet, which had its centre north of the Alps.

As Mircea Eliade explained in his book *A History of Religious Ideas*, the current based on the Emerald tablet is popular Hermeticism or technical Hermetica such as astrology, magic and occult sciences. The Italian current is learned or philosophical Hermetic literature based on the texts of the Corpus Hermeticum.

Were these separate currents or were they originally intricate parts of the one tradition? Some scholars think



Thoth illustration from *Pantheon Egyptien* (1823-1825) by Leon Jean Joseph Dubois (1780-1846). Original from The New York Public Library. Digitally enhanced by rawpixel.

they were separate traditions. Some however believe they belong to a single Hermetic study, with the technical Hermetica as a preparation course and the philosophical texts as a course to understand the practice. This is in line with the ancient view of philosophy where it is a way of living and not as an intellectual speculative exercise as explained well by Pierre Hadot.

Who was Hermes Trismegistus, what knowledge did he possess and pass on to the Renaissance world that had such an impact on the vision of man and the world? For Gary Lachman who wrote a book on Hermes Trismegistus:

“While for Ficino, Lactantius, St Augustine and many others Hermes Trismegistus was a real person, a great sage who started the ‘Hermetic Chain’ of adepts, reaching from his own primal age to Plato, his real origin lies in the impact of Egyptian religion and philosophy on the Greek who inhabited Egypt after its conquest by Alexander the Great”.

Alexander the Great founded the city of Alexandria along the coast of the Mediterranean in Egypt in 331 BC and it

was the meeting point of many different philosophies, religions and traditions from East and West; Egyptian, Greek, Jewish and later Christian. The spirit in Alexandria at that time was one of eclecticism, that is to look at the different perspectives and take what is best in each to create a united whole; not to deny any perspective because it is different but first try to understand it and how it can contribute to a single unity.

One example of this is the Greco-Egyptian god Serapis who was a syncretistic deity derived from the worship of the Egyptian Osiris and Apis. The other example is Hermes Trismegistus, who is the syncretic combination of the Greek god Hermes and the Egyptian god Thoth. Both gods shared many characteristics and the word Trismegistus means Thrice Greatest as he was supposed to be the master of the three worlds, the world of spirit, psyche and soma (matter).

The person who was most responsible for translating, commenting and transmitting these Hermetic teachings, as mentioned, was Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499). Ficino not only translated the works of the ancient world but also absorbed them and gave them a new impetus for his time. He attempted a synthesis of Hermetic and Platonic philosophies with Christianity, in his magnum opus *Platonic Theology*, which placed a new importance on the human being and its connection to its inner soul and the soul of nature.

Ficino was the head of the new Platonic Academy in Florence, which met to study and discuss philosophy. The Renaissance humanism scholar Paul Oskar Kristeller wrote the following on the impact of Ficino:

“In his *Platonic Theology* he gave to his contemporaries an authoritative summary of Platonist philosophy, in which the immortality of the soul is emphasised...His Platonic Academy with its courses and discussions provided for some decades an institutional centre whose influence was spread all over Europe through his letters and other writings.

Assigning to the human soul the central place in the hierarchy of the universe, he gave a metaphysical expression to a notion dear to his humanist predecessors; whereas his doctrine of spiritual love in Plato's sense, for which he coined the term Platonic love, became one of the most popular concepts of later Renaissance literature”

We can see the influence of Hermes Trismegistus was not only restricted to Florence but had an impact on other areas around Italy. In figure 1, which is Isis with Hermes Trismegistus and Moses by the painter Pinturicchio that is in the Borgia Apartments in the Vatican. Isis is instructing Moses (left) and Hermes Trismegistus (right). In figure 2, it is a mosaic of Hermes Trismegistus in Siena Cathedral and it appears that he is instructing two Egyptians.

Another Renaissance figure that disseminated Hermetic knowledge was Giordano Bruno (1548–1600), an Italian



Fig. 1:  
*Isis between Hermes Trismegistus and Moses by Pinturicchio 1492-94*



Fig. 2:  
*Floor inlay in the Cathedral of Siena by Unknown*

The Corpus Hermeticum does not use persuasive arguments but appeals more to the intuition and introspections of the reader.

Dominican friar, philosopher, mathematician and poet. Bruno spent his entire life building a philosophy that united Catholicism, Hermeticism, rationalism and ancient religions and travelled around Europe to share his teachings in a time when the Catholic Church was starting to close its doors on these new ideas.

What is contained in the Corpus Hermeticum? In book one of the Corpus Hermeticum, Hermes Trismegistus has an experience where his consciousness is elevated to the cosmic nous, to the cosmic mind and enters into a question and answer conversation with a figure called Pymander.

Pymander makes known to Hermes Trismegistus the nature of reality, the inner and outer worlds, the evolution of consciousness and the need to transmit this timeless wisdom onto humanity, in an initiatory manner. This means not in an intellectual way but to live the ideas, the values in daily life, as a "way of Hermes", so as to return to the cosmic mind.

This knowledge is known as *gnosis*, a moment of insight into the nature of reality through reflection and introspection. This is opposed to the complementary knowledge *episteme*, which can be translated as reason, using logical arguments to dissect a problem into smaller pieces to understand the parts. The remaining chapters of the Corpus Hermeticum are elaborations on these themes.

The Corpus Hermeticum does not use persuasive arguments but appeals more to the intuition and introspections of the reader. The different chapters of the Corpus Hermeticum agree with each other but there are sections that disagree. Some scholars think they were written by different authors and combined into one book that results in the disagreements. However some scholars, such as Garth Fowden, think these differences are differences in perspectives and experiences in our journey of consciousness, which then can be reconciled.

Some of the key themes in the Corpus Hermeticum that identify it as Hermetic, and which inspired the Renaissance, are outlined below:

- "As above, so below", the laws that operate on the very large are the same laws that operate on the very small, there is a correspondence between the macrocosm and the microcosm.
- The universe is a hierarchy of intelligent beings, a great chain of beings where we can use our spiritual intelligence to ascend; the Nous of the universe is the same Nous within the human being.
- Within the multiplicity of the cosmos, at all its levels, there is an overarching unity that underlies everything.
- The Hermetic project is the transmutation of our temperament and awakening our inner golden potential, as described in the art of alchemy.
- Humanity is called to work together as a collective group to release its bonds from its lower nature and embrace its enlightened higher nature.
- The Hermetic texts present a master and disciple relationship, to enter into a practical application of the Hermetic teachings, to "grow wings on our soul" to elevate our consciousness.

The end of the Italian Renaissance was not the end of Hermes Trismegistus. The Hermetic teachings were a source of inspiration for future societies over the last few hundred years that sought to give humanity a different vision of life beyond the limited materialistic vision that we have today.

Michael Ward

## Magic, Science and the Devil's Doctor

*The life and work of Paracelsus, one of the Renaissance's great magical healers*

The modern conception of magic is often limited to slights of hand, illusions and impressive stunts. Alternatively it conjures an association of witchcraft and the dark arts. Both are mired in elements of fantasy and superstition which developed over time through the ignorance of the middle ages to becoming supplanted with the materialism of the positivist movement of the 19th century. But in the Renaissance there was an understanding of magic that harkened back to the wisdom of antiquity - a natural science that worked with the principles and elements of life.

Where modern science focuses on reason, the chief faculty at play in the sacred sciences of the ancient world was imagination. Not to suggest a mere fabrication of the mind, indulging the whim of the thinker, but rather a vision of life which was able to transcend the limits of matter and penetrate the deepest ideas.

Geniuses of the Renaissance like Marsilio Ficino and Giordano Bruno, spoke of a magic which relied on the understanding and mastery of the natural correspondences of the universe. Astrology, alchemy, talismanic magic, all depended on the practitioner's awareness of the underlying unity of things. The role of the magician or magus was to facilitate the natural processes that occur when complementary forces are harnessed.

'Profound magic is to know how to unite contraries, having found the point of union' - Giordano Bruno



Statue of Giordano Bruno, Campo de' Fiori, Rome

This philosophy of unity explains that everything is connected and interconnected and has an impact on the whole. Knowledge of this would allow the sage to interact with the elements in a holistic and integral way, allowing some to perform what would, to the superstitious, be considered miracles.

A practitioner of this magical science, in the field of medicine, was the famous (and infamous) Paracelsus. Called by his detractors 'The Devil's Doctor', Paracelsus stunned the medieval community with his powers of healing. Fueled by a natural understanding of healing and a foundational principle of treating the person and not the disease, Paracelsus was both humanist and provocateur in a time when medical science had collapsed into decadence and corruption.

It has been observed that the general malaise and short lifespan of the time showed there was a lack of sophisticated processes and knowledge. While there were doctors, they couldn't really be called practitioners of a healing art. What options were available were often worse than the illness - brutal surgeries regularly being employed which could maim or kill the patient and without any anaesthesia implying a practice akin to torture. Disease was rampant, plague, cholera, dysentery, hygiene was abysmal and diet was even worse.

Born in Switzerland in 1493 to the name Philippus Aureolus Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim, Paracelsus would learn many things about healing from his father, also a physician. As a young man he travelled throughout Europe and developed a keen interest in natural sciences like alchemy, herbalism, astrology, some of which were first inculcated to him by his father. His various interests led him to develop a method of healing largely inspired by sympathies, or the causal relationship between the invisible and visible dimensions of life.

'The art of healing comes from nature, not from the physician. Therefore the physician must start from nature, with an open mind...Every physician must be rich in knowledge, and not only of that which is written in books; his patients should be his book, they will never mislead him.'

There was a twofold importance of sympathies for Paracelsus. Firstly, the moral implication of the practitioner having sympathy for the patient - something he observed as sorely lacking in a decadent medical system where the patient's well-being was almost an afterthought.



Portrait of Paracelsus, detail of the title page of Oswald Croll's *Basilica chymica* by Aegidius Sadeler 1629

On the magical side, Paracelsus understood life in the classic Renaissance vision of a living macrocosm and saw how everything in nature, the universe and man was interconnected. This interconnection and interdependence created certain sympathies or affinities whereby various forces could be observed as having different impacts; both positive and negative. A physician's role was in understanding these sympathies and their impacts in being able to heal the patient.

The unparalleled success with which Paracelsus' treatments worked only drove his critics to further irritation. The man himself did not help calm his own controversy. He was brash, arrogant and took every opportunity he could to degenerate those in prominent positions within the medical community. Even the name he adopted 'Paracelsus' was to indicate that he vastly excelled the Greek philosopher Celsus. He was described by contemporaries as a difficult boor.

Paracelsus' writings were published in low German, the common tongue, and not in the medieval Latin of the academics. He also lectured in German, considering it more important to be understood than to be impressive. His unconventional, yet accessible, methods showed consistency in curing diseases that had previously proven stubborn to treat. All this earned Paracelsus a hallowed reputation among the people and an equally vociferous ire from his fellow doctors.

It is sometimes said that Paracelsus was killed in a brawl, but there is considerable speculation that in 1541 the great physician was murdered by a professional assassin employed by his jealous and vindictive enemies.

The writings of Paracelsus explain his theory that all main illnesses can be attributed to five fundamental causes, all demonstrating the impact of sympathetic, often invisible influences and, therefore, requiring magical treatment.

### Sidereal Influences

The relationship between the stars and heavenly bodies has an effect on the earth's atmosphere and all living beings within it. It stands to reason, if everything is connected, then the energies created by the very movement of the heavens would impact everything around them. We have long accepted the lunar influences on our psyche, magical doctors of the 16th century were already explaining that all planets and stars have similar but varying influences.

Such cures would consist in applying the influence of the contrary planet by the use of sympathetic plants and herbs, metals and minerals or talismans. For example, an illness caused by the influence of the Moon could be cured by subjecting the patient in some way to the influence of its opposing planet, the Sun. This could take the form of using gold (a metal under the influence of the sun), or a plant connected with the Sun, on a day when the Sun is in a beneficial aspect to the patient's horoscope.

### Impurities, poisonous substances and internal obstructions

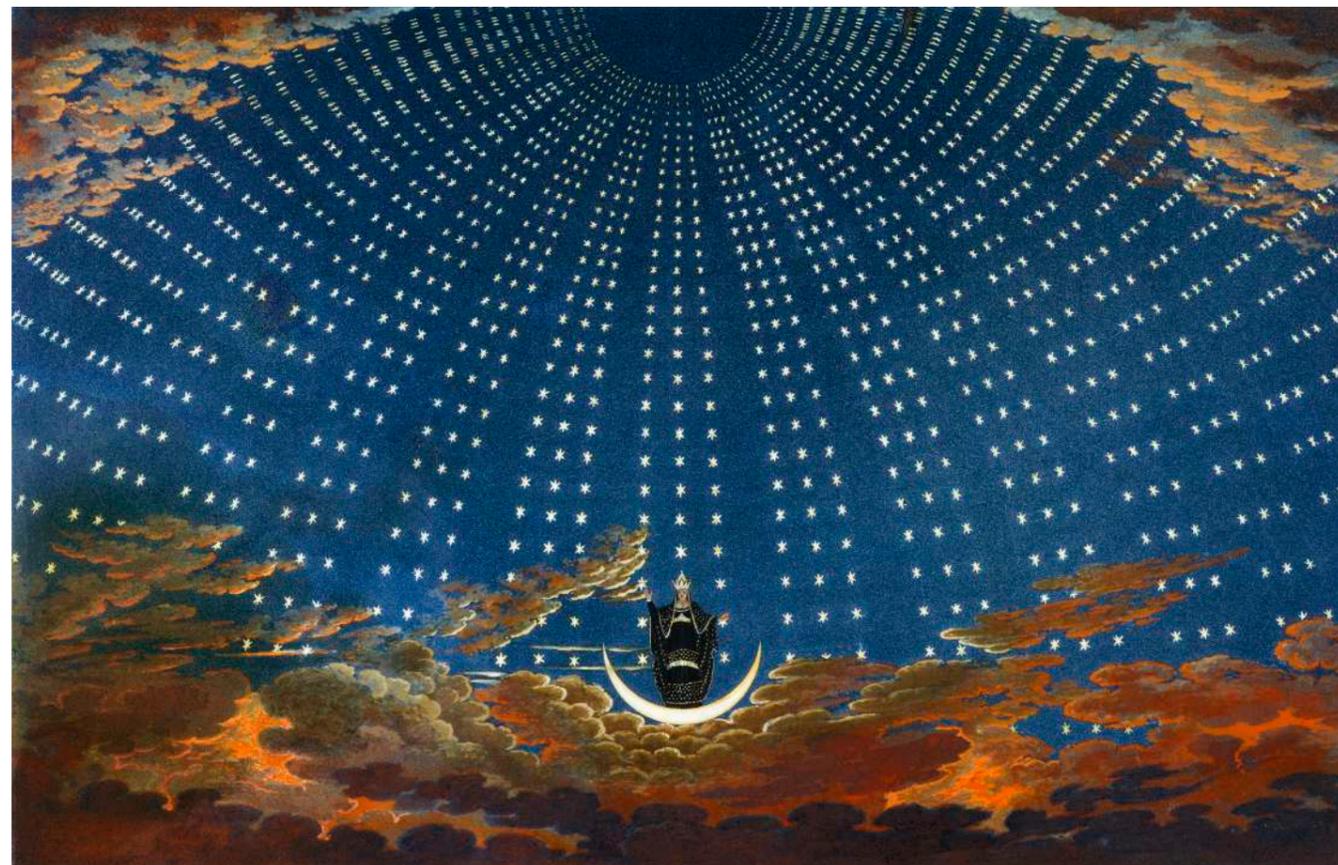
We cannot assert that Paracelsus was the first to discuss the idea of 'detoxing' but he was clear on the importance of managing our intake of substances as any excesses would create blockages in the system. Whether physical or energetical, these blockages would cut off circulation and the affected area would stagnate and become toxic. The role of the physician would be to help the patient remove the blockage so that the energy could flow and healing could naturally take place.

### Wrong physical habits, resulting in the corruption of natural processes

Here the moral dimension becomes evident, Paracelsus reminding us that no matter the skill of the doctor, if the patient cannot control themselves then they will become ill from their cumulative excesses. Over eating, indulgence in alcohol, any unwise habits that are not corrected can pose health issues down the line. But nature is forgiving, as long as we correct before too much damage is done, most sickness can be healed. It is the timeless art of moderation - balance in all things, promoted by the wisdom of all cultures.

### Psychological causes

Another area of common understanding today, pioneered



Design for *The Magic Flute: The Hall of Stars in the Palace of the Queen of the Night, Act 1, Scene 6* (1847–1849) print in high resolution by After Karl Friedrich Schinkel. Original from The MET Museum. Digitally enhanced by rawpixel.

by these magical doctors, who did not refer to psychosomatic conditions and yet were fully aware of the power of one's state of mind to affect their health. Paracelsus wrote of negative imagination, fuelled by fears, negativity, doubts, hopelessness, all of which could wear down a person's resolve and render them susceptible to illness.

### Spiritual causes created by disobedience to the law of God

One of the most serious issues Paracelsus wrote of was the implications for one's health in abandoning their faith. To deviate from one's convictions or to break away from the laws of God. We can understand this also as disloyalty to our own values and conscience.

So called spiritual causes for Paracelsus may not always have immediate solutions. Like karma in the east, some causes are impossible to discern and so the resulting impact may need to burn itself out, or some simple positive actions can be taken to bring the patient back on a more correct path.

What is clear in the doctrine of Paracelsus is that Renaissance magic reintroduced healing to medicine. The magical component brought a greater vision and depth of understanding which in turn afforded incredible new treatments to be developed but the moral dimension that accompanied this vision brought a certain humanity back to the process of healing. The treatment began with the patient, not the illness. The physician had to have a

keen sensitivity to read the book of nature, not only a medical textbook. Sympathies showed the connective nature of life and the holistic approach of Renaissance medicine embodied this.

The contributions of Paracelsus in modern medicine; toxicology, vaccination, homeopathy, chemotherapy, are in themselves staggering, but the heart and wisdom with which he practised medicine is his greatest legacy. Others, like Marsilio Ficino and Cornelius Agrippa worked similar marvels, what some called miracles and some called heresy, all of which was magic, as we have philosophically defined it.

Magic is as far from satanic witchcraft as it is from cheap parlour tricks. What the Renaissance illustrated through natural magic was a deep understanding of the laws and principles that govern life, the universe and the human being. Magic unites reason and imagination in a science of the invisible, no less valid because of its intangibility. On the contrary, magic and science are two sides of the same coin. In the realm of healing, magic compliments empirical science in augmenting our understanding of health as an integrated and moral way of being, and not only treating a body of physical illness.

Aidan Murphy

# Marsilio Ficino

## and the Challenge of Transmission

*The efforts of one of the Fathers of the Renaissance, laid bare.*

The Italian Renaissance emerged in the Middle Ages, which were not as dark as we sometimes tend to think. In fact, in all historical eras exceptional figures, schools of thought and ideas can emerge. It is the possibility of public expression of such ideas that changes through time. Academies, studios, groups of scholars and artists were gathering more or less formally in every city-state in the Italian peninsula at least a century before Marsilio Ficino and his Neoplatonic Florentine circle gained prominence among the intellectuals of the time.

These intellectual circles that formed at the beginning of the Renaissance were new expressions of Humanism, and the point of reference was not only Plato but also Ciceronian eclecticism, the Eastern tradition and, to some extent, Aristotle. This was allowed by a certain openness and fluidity in society that was also present in the Church during a period that peaked with the Council of Florence (1431–1449) and ended with the Council of Trent (1545–1563).

While Christianity was trying to conciliate its Eastern and the Western traditions and fight back the advancements of the Turks in Asia Minor, many Greek scholars fled from Constantinople to Florence. One of the main

historical legacies of the Council of Florence were the lectures on Greek classical literature and philosophy given by Eastern delegates, and especially the renowned Neoplatonist Gemistus Pletho, who greatly encouraged the progress of Renaissance humanism.

It was Pletho who, on meeting Cosimo de' Medici in Florence, influenced the emergence of the Neoplatonic circle led by Ficino. The spirit of renewal was manifested in the integration within the Christian liturgy of aspects of classical literary expression such as the hymns. The aim was obviously not to revive paganism but to make use of spiritual devices allowing human minds to raise from the 'corporeal confusion' towards the contemplation of invisible truths; to revive a meditative practice that would mould the imagination of the subject in its interaction with the divine, thus triggering a process of spiritual transformation. Allegories within poetry, hymns and art was a valid instrument for attenuating controversial aspects of the pagan imaginaries. If the form was considered acceptable by both the Humanists and the Church, the interpretation of such 'invisible truths' was not so easily open to debate.

Italian society at the time was still patrolled by the Inquisition. The Athenian Platonic academy was regarded as a 'mythological' institution by the Humanist academies; and it gave them a legitimacy to exist under the watchful eye of the Church. However, Ficino never really established a formal philosophical academy, not in the Platonic way. Educated people of the time knew that the Academy, suppressed by the Christian Emperor Justinian in 529 AD, had been a vocal opponent of Christian religion. To have organised an explicitly Platonic or Neoplatonic School would have been seen as a provocative act in a moment where Christian theology was trying to re-establish itself. Not all the classical thought that was being revived was considered acceptable, and some aspects of it would be openly denounced.

For example, in 1468 Pope Paul II forbade groups of Roman intellectuals to use the word *academia* (or *fratres academici*, 'academic brotherhood'), 'either seriously or in jest'. Using academic names could bring about the accusation of being 'a sect' of heretics, epicureans, republicans, atheists, neopagans, and so on. In time, certain academies were re-established because they were able to earn a religious or political patronage that made them easier to control, and certainly more constrained. In many cases, such as in Naples and



Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499)

Florence, the academies would partially overlap with the universities and their growing ideology of objectivism and of a mechanistic vision of life.

Ficino, who translated into Latin all of Plato's works, the *Enneads* of Plotinus, and various other Neoplatonist works, contributed to synthesise a body of knowledge of ancient doctrines converging on recurrent themes such as; the existence of a living nature, the coherence among multiple religious traditions and a knowledge whose goal was the transformation of its practitioner.

Within these Neoplatonist teachings the re-emergence of philosophy as a spiritual path headed towards self-transformation and reunion with the metaphysical One, which contrasted with the predominant view of the time that saw Philosophy as 'ancilla theologiae': useful but subordinated to the pursuit of the Christian faith. This division would subsequently become a sharp one: the physical would become the realm of science, the metaphysical the realm of (Christian) religion and philosophy a purely intellectual and critical discipline.

According to Ficino, known as 'concordist', wisdom was to be sought from all sources. Through the rediscovery of Hermeticism and the concept of 'magic' (The *Corpus Hermeticum* was Ficino's first translation) he proposed a philosophy of balance, and a synthesis between Aristotelian ethics and Neoplatonic mysticism. He saw this as a connection between the investigation of the individual's moral strengths and that of Magi; the 'Great Science' of timeless principles. For Ficino, Philosophy was about entering into union with the 'Laws of life', and by practising these principles through one's actions, Man reaches higher levels of his being.

We should remember Ficino specifically as a spokesman for this renewed relationship of man with the cosmos, of Man as a great miracle with power of acting on himself and Nature, of the Human Being in his best and highest potential without distinctions based on faith. It's exactly this link with Hermeticism that helped the emergence of geniuses such as Leonardo Da Vinci and Galileo Galilei and encouraged some of the applied sciences.

The short, but prolific period of innovation even within Christian liturgy was interrupted by two factors. On the one hand there was the rise of the Lutheran schism and the Counter-Reformation. And at the same time there emerged a sharp division between reason and faith, Platonism and Aristotelianism, through the growing mechanisation cultivated in universities, and the attempts to understand God with the instruments of logic.

The attempt to 'fuse' many schools of thought to which Ficino always remained loyal, failed in an era in which active imagination was relegated as 'mistress of error and falsehood' and the reinstatement that truth and real virtue could only be achieved through faith and God's grace. Any metaphysical proposition not included in the official theology was considered illegal and punishable by death or exile.

What Ficino brought about was an impetus, more than a philosophical programme for the transformation of society through the transformation of the human being.

Ficino, the 'doctor of the Soul', identified with the Socratic image of the teacher as a 'midwife of ideas', encouraging learning through true piety, devotion to the Laws of Life. Many of his pupils had little or no involvement with Platonism after leaving Ficino's care. Some of them opened 'Platonic Academies' in Europe, corresponded by letters with their 'Master', and propagated an educational project based on the conviction that humanist education and philosophical piety should go hand in hand.

Ficino remained loyal throughout his life to the Hellenistic idea of philosophy as a way of living rather than a purely theoretical pursuit. However, he wasn't able to organise a system of transmission of the transformative impetus of the Renaissance. What was left was a rather formalistic idea of platonic education: loyal to the non-dogmatic eclecticism of the humanists, opposing exclusive adherence to one line of thought, but too weak to withstand the wider historical dynamics opposing any proposition of synthesis, interconnection and union of apparent opposites so dear to the classical spirit.

Giulia Giacco



Lorenzo de' Medici 1449-1492

# Genius of the Northern Renaissance

## The Life and Works of Albrecht Dürer

If you were asked to name an artist of the Renaissance who was a superb painter, draughtsman, and skilled in science and mathematics, you would most likely think of Leonardo da Vinci. But there were others, and foremost among them was a German artist named Albrecht Dürer. Dürer was the leading artist of what is now called the 'Northern Renaissance', meaning north of the Alps, as distinct from the Italian Renaissance, south of the Alps.

Dürer was born in 1471 in Nuremberg, Germany, at a time when Germany was part of the Holy Roman Empire. As a young teenager he was trained initially in metal craft and drawing under his father, a well known goldsmith. However, his precocious talent in drawing brought about his apprenticeship to the leading artist in Nuremberg. After graduating, Dürer spent a number of years travelling and learning his trade in artists workshops in cities throughout northern Europe.

In 1494, at the age of 23 he made his first of two trips across the Alps to Venice, Italy, one of the leading centres of art at that time. Dürer learnt much about Italian Renaissance art during his trip, and was hugely influenced by it. On his return to Nuremberg, he opened his own art workshop. As well as an artist, he proved to be a skilled businessman, and his art came to the attention of Maximilian I, the Holy Roman Emperor, who became Dürer's leading patron. During the Renaissance, most artists made a living from wealthy patrons, such as clergy and political leaders, who commissioned them to create art. Those artworks often hung on walls in private residences, and were only seen by a privileged few.

Dürer's workshop was most successful in making high quality 'woodcut' prints. Woodcut printing dates as far back as 7th century China. The image to be printed is incised or cut into a wooden block. Ink is applied, and the block is pressed onto the paper to transfer the image. Hundreds of copies could be printed in this way. Prints were cheaper to make and sell, easy to transport, and multiple copies of the same original artwork could be made.

A new interest in collecting and appreciating printed artwork was created, especially among the prosperous middle classes in Europe. Making and selling prints proved a reliable source of income for Dürer. The superb

quality and detail of his woodcut prints made him a famous public celebrity across Europe, in a way that had never been achieved by an artist before. Some have called Dürer 'the Andy Warhol of the Renaissance'. Dürer signed almost all his works with a unique monogram of his initials, in the form of a capital letter A containing inside it the capital letter D. He was one of the first artists to 'brand' or identify his work in this way.

Dürer's work was wide-ranging, including portraits, self-portraits, drawings, altarpiece paintings, prints and books.

### Self-portraits

Dürer painted a series of self-portraits during his twenties, the most famous of which is called "Self Portrait at Age 28". In this painting, he portrays himself in a classic image of Jesus Christ, looking directly at the



Self-Portrait, by Albrecht Dürer, 1500



Left: The Four Horsemen, from The Apocalypse, by Albrecht Dürer, 1498

viewer, right hand conveying a blessing. As a Christian, Dürer may have wanted to convey that his skills were God given. He may also have wanted to portray himself as a confident and successful artist.

### Drawings

One of his most famous works is a simple pen and ink sketch called "Praying Hands". The image drawn is the hands of an apostle in prayer, made in preparation for a large oil painting or altarpiece, to be displayed behind a church altar. The altarpiece was subsequently destroyed by fire, but the Praying Hands sketch survived, and became famous as an international symbol of piety.



*Praying Hands by Albrecht Dürer 1508*

### Altarpiece Paintings

An altarpiece is a set of artworks, usually large format paintings, displayed on the wall behind the altar in a Christian church. Dürer completed a number of such commissions, one of which was named the 'Adoration of the Magi', for All Saints' Church in Wittenberg, Germany, completed in 1505. Dürer styled the painting as a combination of northern naturalism with Italian use of perspective, ideal proportions and colour.

### Prints

Dürer became famous mainly because of the high quality of his woodcut prints. In 1498 he produced a series of



*Adoration of the Magi by Albrecht Dürer 1504*

prints called the Apocalypse, depicting scenes from the Bible's Book of Revelations. The most famous of these is 'The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse', the four riders representing Death, Famine, War and Plague. A biblical prophecy foretelling that the end of the world would occur in the year 1500 was widely believed by Christians at the time. The Apocalypse print series proved to be hugely successful for Dürer.

### Books

Dürer wrote a number of books on theoretical subjects ranging from geometry, perspective drawing, human proportions, and aesthetics. Much of his learnings in these areas were acquired on his visits to Italy. He did not invent novel ideas, as such, but instead brought a scientific discipline to the subjects he wrote about.

What inspired Albrecht Dürer to create such a vast 'oeuvre', or body of artistic work?

Many Renaissance artists took inspiration from the divine, from God. Dürer wrote:

"Why has God given me such magnificent talent? It is a curse as well as a great blessing".

His self portrait in the image of Jesus Christ is perhaps an example of such inspiration.

Dürer may have been inspired by Humanism, as he was known to be a follower. Humanism at the time of the Renaissance meant the revival of the study of Greco-Roman classical antiquity, bypassing the Middle Ages. Areas studied included grammar, rhetoric, history, poetry, and moral philosophy, subjects that may have influenced his art.

Dürer may have been driven by the spirit of competition with artists of the Italian Renaissance, in particular with Leonardo da Vinci. While in Venice, Dürer corresponded by letters with da Vinci, and had seen some of his work.

Dürer also wrote books on theoretical subjects, as did da Vinci.

Albrecht Dürer died in 1528, aged 56. His legacy is vast, not just in terms of the volume of paintings, drawings and prints that survive in museums and private collections today. Dürer was perhaps the first European artist entrepreneur, a master of self promotion and branding, before brands were even known. His monogram, like a trademark, became familiar across Europe. In doing so, Dürer brought artistic beauty and realism to a much wider audience.

The quality of Dürer's paintings, prints and drawings were an inspiration to other artists across much of Europe, even in Renaissance Italy. However, many aspiring Dürers found that they were unable to achieve the quality and detail of the master himself. His time spent in Italy enabled Dürer to bring the classical artistic motifs of the Italian Renaissance to Northern art. These motifs included perspective, ideal proportions, and geometry. In turn, his work, especially his prints, influenced Italian art for many years after his death.

Whatever his inspiration, Dürer left a legacy that has influenced European art down through the centuries. He truly was the genius of the Northern Renaissance!

Tim Leahy

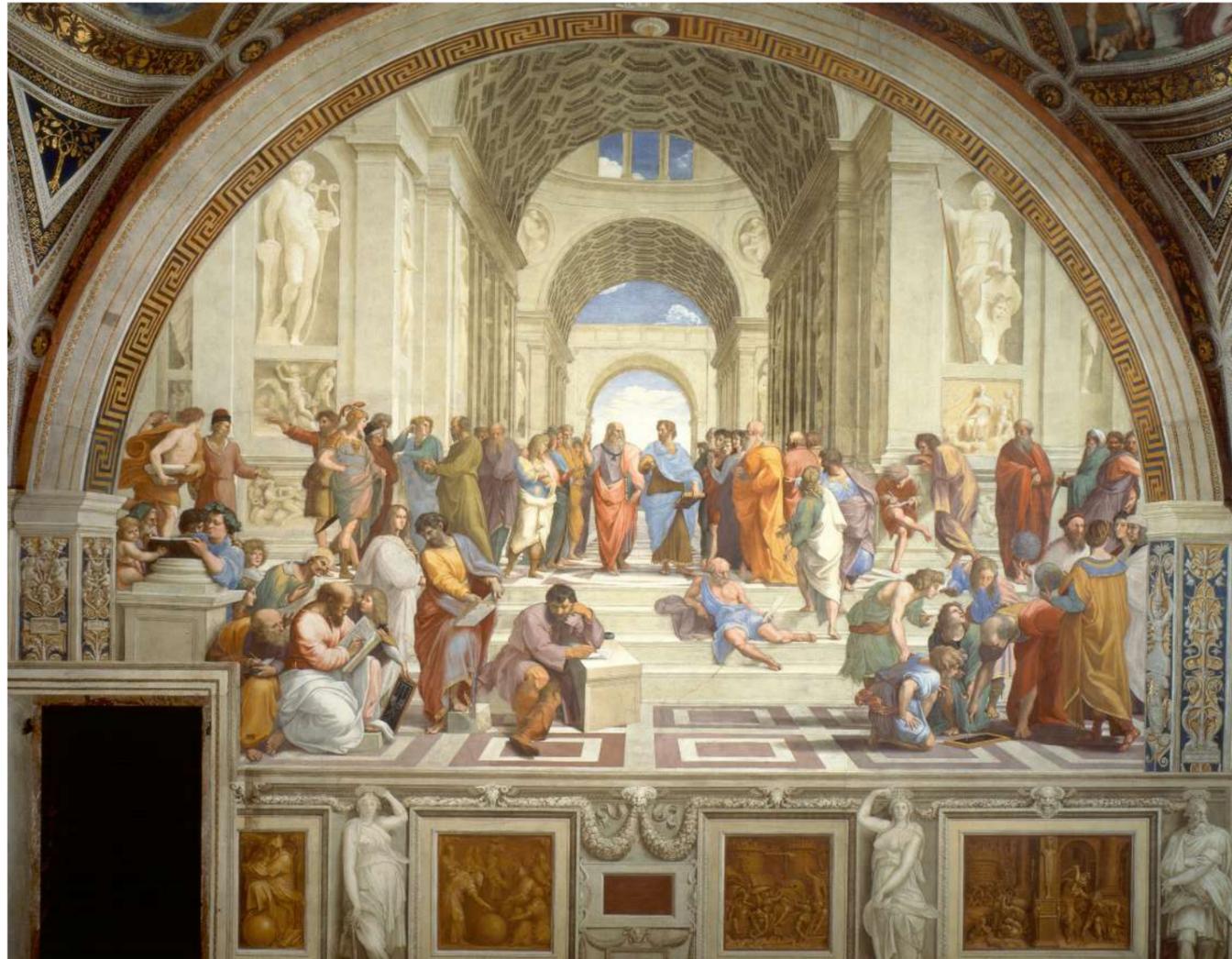
No single man can be taken as a model for a perfect figure, for no man lives on earth who is endowed with the whole of beauty.

- Albrecht Dürer



*Pond in the Woods by Albrecht Dürer 1496*

The School of Athens by Raphael 1509-11



## Academy Learning

### *An insight in to the history, means and objectives of the Renaissance's greatest centres of education*

As with many other concepts, the passing of time has distorted or changed the understanding of original meanings and ideas. Same goes for the Academies of the Renaissance in Italy. Today, 'the academy' is virtually synonymous with a bastion of the scholarly establishment that is out of touch with common experience and, perhaps, common sense. To call a question 'academic' is to dismiss its relevance to the real world. Intellectuals throwing convoluted statements at each other to show off their mental prowess.

Nothing, however, could be further from the profile of the academies blanketing late Renaissance Italy.

Taking shape in the fifteenth and sixteenth century, academies provided an alternative to the sometimes pedantic university world, one that was open to new

people, new ideas, and new modes of intellectual expression. Academies might offer public lectures, stage plays, produce court festivals, experiment with new music, or sponsor poetry contests. Princes, merchants, professionals, and artisans gathered in them alongside poets and scholars.

Academies used vernacular languages like Italian and French instead of the erudite Latin of the Church and of the professoriate. Rather than imparting textbook knowledge to callow students, they engaged the imaginations of mature men and, if rarely, women.

Ranging widely over literature, music, art, and natural science, they burst the confines of the traditional university curriculum and topics such as the colour of the eyes, anatomy and physiology, love, dreams, grammar,

The academies of Italy in the 15th and 16th century were the building blocks of the Renaissance and helped to let emerge once again the beauty, truth and wisdom that is contained in history.

the soul, law and justice, free will, fortune, fate, the elements (earth, water, air, fire), friendship, envy and jealousy, providence, beauty, honor, the spots on the moon, monsters, medicine (for and against), peace and concord were readily discussed.

Vernacular literature, liberal arts, music, mathematics, and the study of nature were all parts of a wider landscape of interests. It is exactly this tension and strife towards a unifying and organic picture of knowledge that threatens any attempt at formulating a classification of themes and contents that were addressed by the first Renaissance academies.

Some aimed explicitly to rekindle a Platonic spirit, making all-encompassing knowledge the road to virtue, like the Platonic Academy of Florence created by Cosimo de' Medici. Situated at the Medici villa at Careggi the academy with its endowment of Greek manuscripts became one of the foremost intellectual centers of Europe.

Marsilio Ficino became head of the Platonic Academy in 1462. He was an Italian philosopher, theologian, and linguist whose translations and commentaries on the writings of Plato and other classical Greek authors generated the Florentine Platonist Renaissance that influenced European thought for two centuries. Leonardo, Botticelli and Michelangelo were some of the artists that attended the Academies set up by the Medici's.

The Medici family owned one of the most successful banks in Italy, the Medici Bank. It was the largest and most respected bank in Europe during its prime. Money clearly had a role to play in the way the academies were set up (the Medici family spent roughly €420m over 30 years to fund the academies of Renaissance Italy) but that wasn't the key to their success. Financially speaking we are currently well placed to follow in their footsteps, yet there is something missing. What is often lacking is a

necessity of vision. The secret in the success of the academies set up by the Medici's and many others was that they didn't simply hand over the cash, but that they had a vision.

The vision was the promotion of beauty, truth and wisdom. We would not remember the Renaissance if its leaders simply made piles of cash. No one cares about that for any length of time. It is the vision on which this money was spent that created the reputation, the legacy of the Renaissance and its institutions.

Many books were written, for example, on the architecture of buildings, and the design of the squares and other aspects of the city. So the emergence of the Architecture in Florence and later Venice, Rome and Siena wasn't by chance. Volumes were written on what works and what doesn't. These books and manuscripts were not simply collected for studying but to put into practice the wisdom that was contained in them.

The Renaissance attitude towards history was a rather practical one. They wanted to run their societies successfully, to make their people wise. The Epicurean philosophy with its views on friendship, simplicity and acceptance of limitations for example wasn't exciting simply because it was old, but because its wisdom was still needed. They weren't looking for ancient ideas to fill in the blanks on how the past used to be, but because they were looking for help to create better ways of thinking for the present.

In our society the Renaissance has a lot of prestige. We think we honor it by going around its cities, memorising dates and examining key works. But it is not about looking at their world through our eyes, but using their vision to look at our own.

The academies of Italy in the 15th and 16th century were the building blocks of the Renaissance and helped to let emerge once again the beauty, truth and wisdom that is contained in history.

We should try to generate a Renaissance in our own societies with the inspiration of the Renaissance Men and Women.

Markus Edin

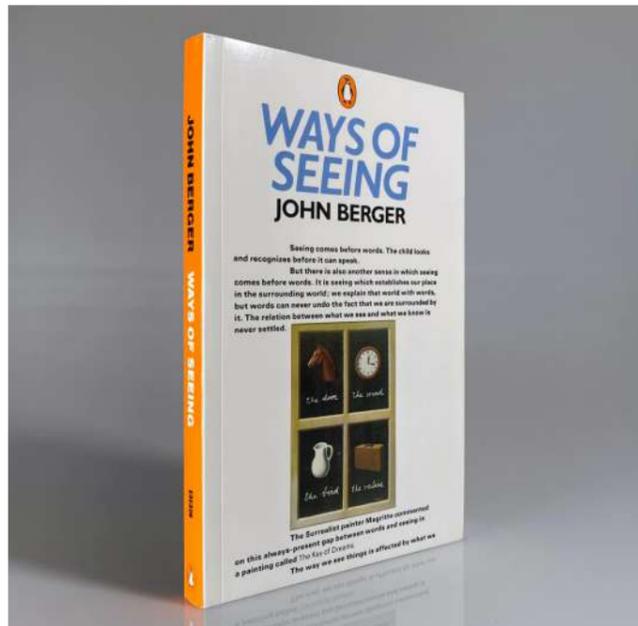
# WAYS OF SEEING

## WITH JOHN BERGER

*Revisiting a classic show about classical art - both as relevant as ever*

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the now legendary art series 'Ways of Seeing' by John Berger. First broadcast over four consecutive weeks in 1972 on BBC 2 on Saturday night as an alternative to *Match of the Day* on BBC1, this strange mini series made very little impact at the time. Berger's didactic tone and looking more like a footballer out on the town after the match rather than an art critic, no doubt made for some bewildering viewing at the time. In hindsight though, what was being witnessed by a small few, was a grain of insight which would over 50 years roll within the tumult of culture to emerge a hardened pearl which has become revered by seasoned art critics and passive art viewers alike.

In the first episode, Berger eyeballs the camera and tells us that 'perspective', the convention which was unique to European art and first developed in the early Renaissance centered everything on the eye of the beholder. It was, he describes, like a 'lighthouse - only instead of light traveling outwards, appearances travel in.' And not only is the painting converging on the eye as the central focus, the communication of the painting is silent and still as Berger says, it 'permeates the actual material, the paint, in which one follows the traces of the painter's immediate gestures'. In viewing the painting we are



*Ways of Seeing, was published by Penguin in 1972 after the show aired.*

witnessing a time locked and frozen forever which again travels to the eye, the 'vanishing point' of this 'reversed' perspective.

But this is John waxing lyrical about being in the physical presence of a painting (if seen in a gallery or church etc) and conjuring up our imagination as to how a Renaissance viewer may have experienced a painting and derived meaning or felt its beauty. It is from this opening image he pushes us forward to look at how we see the world in modern terms, through the lens of cameras, photography or television beamed into our living rooms. The image he says now comes to us, we no longer go to it as a place of homage or worship.

With the advent of photography in the 20th Century and a new age of mechanical reproduction, he argues that we have stripped the original painting of its deeper meaning and sacred value. The surviving artifact of the physical painting is instead given 'market value' and a bewildering mystique or aura influenced by its often unseemly sale price.

Continuing on over four episodes, Berger who was a staunch marxist thinker is not shy about highlighting the profane nature of European painting and taking more sacred gloss from the context of the canvas. He points out the 'why, what and who' of painting very clearly. Much of why paintings were painted was to show wealth and status, what was in paintings is often the subject of that wealth; the patrons themselves or family members. One of Berger's examples of this is 'The Ambassadors' by Holbein in which he brilliantly parallels this point of the showing of wealth and status in painting with the modern world of advertising to conclude that nothing much has changed.

Ways of Seeing does however outlive simply being a dusty 70s marxist critic of European Art. Looking at the episodes now on Youtube, there is a poignant truth to what Berger is telling us from 50 years ago and profoundly still hitting a mark today even when made so long before the internet. He tells us how we use images like words, but images with reproduction are continuously ambiguous and morphing in meaning.

In our technological age and our relationship to the image and that of our own image in that social or virtual world, it



*John Berger, art critic and host of Ways of Seeing, 1926-2017*

could seem like Berger's critique is now a little twee or simplistic, but at the end of the first episode he once again eyeballs us and prophetically announces 'consider what I have arranged - but be skeptical of it'.

Over 50 years, not only has the series grown in popularity but a book adaptation first published that same year has grown to selling 1.5 million copies and it's strange cover in which the first opening paragraph is shown, wastes no time in getting to the heart of Berger's thesis. He wants us to look and examine the world, with openness, wonder and freshness and perhaps that is key to why it still feels that way five decades on. The cover reads:

**LOOKING AT THE EPISODES NOW ON YOUTUBE, THERE IS A POIGNANT TRUTH TO WHAT BERGER IS TELLING US FROM 50 YEARS AGO**

"Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak. But there is another sense in which seeing comes before words. It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but the words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it. The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled."

Paul Savage



*The Ambassadors by Hans Holbein the Younger 1533*

