

⁶ Visual Analysis of “Saint Luke Drawing the Virgin” by ⁴ Rogier Van Der Weyden

Rogier Van Der Weyden (1400-1464) was a Netherlandish artist of the 15th century. He was one of the most important artists of the Northern Renaissance, known for his mastery of composition, anatomy, and the use of light and shadow. One of his masterpieces, ² “Saint Luke Drawing the Virgin”, is a large oil and tempera on oak panel painting created by him around the mid-15th century (1435-1440) (Horst Woldemar Janson et al., p486). It is through the interactive and detailed composition, careful choices of color, sharp contrast between light and shadow, as well as various stylistic iconography, Van Der Weyden in his artwork, “Saint Luke Drawing the Virgin”, vividly humanizes Virgin Mary and baby Jesus, characterizing the realism of the figures, creating an artistic and divine atmosphere. This paper focused on the visual analysis of “Saint Luke Drawing the Virgin” from three major aspects: spatial construction, color, together with light and shadow, and the iconography presented in the painting.

Looking at the painting as a whole, there are three main figures in the foreground and an enclosed garden at the back. There are two other figures standing and looking out over the far wall to a river that is away into the landscape. The painting demonstrates the scenario in which St. Luke drew the Virgin Mary and infant Jesus with a stylus of silver scraped across the prepared paper. From a religious aspect, the painting “Saint Luke Drawing the Virgin” portrays a Bible event. Saint Luke is considered the person that created the first portraits of the Virgin Mary. Thus, he is later considered the patron saint of painters’ guilds. With such context, artists would paint the depiction of the Virgin as a way to achieve master status in guilds (Smee).

The whole composition is intricate yet detailed, effectively emphasizing the main figures in the painting. The position of the Virgin Mary and Saint Luke has been carefully considered.

Unlike most Italian Renaissance artists, instead of focusing on the main figure and placing the character at the center of the composition, Van Der Weyden pays attention to both the person and the setting. In this painting, with the Virgin and baby Jesus being placed on the left and St. Luke being placed on the right of the panel, the center of the artwork is filled with a landscape. Van Der Weyden reveals ¹ to the viewer's gaze a prospect of a river running away into the distance along with urban constructions on the bank. With the river in the landscape as well as the views on the bank of the river going into the distance, the painting displays careful use of linear perspective. This creates a sense of spatial depth, which also contributes to the realism of the painting. In terms of the relative position between the Virgin Mary and St. Luke, according to the traditional reading order, people tend to read from left to right. By placing the Virgin Mary, who is breastfeeding baby Jesus, on the left side, Rogier provides the audience with a primary glance at these two figures, emphasizing the feminine and devotion of the Virgin Mary. As mentioned previously, Saint Luke is placed ⁵ on the opposite side of the Virgin Mary and Baby Jesus on the right of the panel. He kneels at an angle on the right side of the piece, holding a piece of paper in one of his hands, with his eyes focusing on the Virgin. ³ The painting is done with approximate symmetry. The two sides are not perfectly balanced but the focal point is well split between the two subjects.

The painting is characterized by its realism and attention to detail, as well as its use of light and shadow in an attempt of creating depth and volume in major figures. The oil paint palette is composed of rich and earthy colors. The predominant color is observed to be yellow, red, and orange. The warm-toned painting creates a calm, peaceful, and quaint atmosphere. The color of the subject's robes is also related to religious symbolism. The Virgin Mary is depicted wearing blue as a color implying femininity and as a representation of the Queen of Heaven. St.

Luke's clothes are red, indicating masculinity. Two light sources are observed in "¹Saint Luke Drawing the Virgin". One is at the front of the room where the viewer is. The second light source is from the back of the open landscape. The light in this painting is even and flat, casting on the Virgin Mary, baby Jesus, and St. Luke. More light is observed on Mary as a way of emphasizing. The Virgin Mary and St. Luke are given the appearance of human bodies under layers of fabric, with the illusion being achieved using lighting and depth. The light on the joints creates shadow, which illustrates the shape of parts of their bodies. Throughout the piece, the visual texture is evident, especially in Mary's hair, the silk weave behind her, as well as in her and St. Luke's clothing. To render the Virgin Mary and Saint Luke, particular details such as the folds in the robes and the texture of their hair and skin are carefully portrayed. With light and shadow, Van der Weyden creates a sense of solidity and volume in his figures. This further enhances the illusion of luminosity and otherworldliness.

The style of this work is well-adjusted to the pieces coming out of 15th-century Flanders and it is naturalistic, with impeccable levels of visual detail and deep iconography in depicting the main figures. Instead of kneeling motionlessly, St. Luke approached gently like the angel of the Annunciation, absorbed in his work while with his gaze pointed towards the Virgin Mary, implying his devotion and the Virgin Mary's divine. As the saint watches the Virgin intently, his hands are positioned and gestured in a way that indicates the careful usage of silverpoint and the paper. The evangelist's remarkable posture seems almost in contrast with the concentration emanating from his face and hands. In this way, the figure of St. Luke is portrayed as a devout disciple. The figure of Baby Jesus is also well portrayed. The feet and fingers of the infant Jesus are flexible and have a sense of movement as he smiles. This humanizes the baby Jesus and the figure is, therefore, more naturalistic. The facial emotional expression of the Virgin Mary is

observed to be calm and feminine with graciousness. Rogier hence depicts the Virgin Mary as an embodiment of virtue and grace, as well as a symbol of divine inspiration. These iconographic details highlight the characteristics of the figures in the painting and enhance the overall tone of the peacefulness of the painting, further conveying the theme of artistic creation and divine inspiration.

As an artwork from the Early Northern Renaissance, “²Saint Luke Drawing the Virgin” is exemplary of the features of its period. In Northern Renaissance art, techniques of linear perspective and illumination were widely applied. Also, realistic elements and religious features were prevalent (Marrow, p3). In Rogier’s “¹Saint Luke Drawing the Virgin”, the urban structures and the river at the back follow the rule of linear perspective which creates a more accurate overall spatial arrangement. Illuminations are used in creating a holy and divine atmosphere around the Virgin Mary and baby Jesus. Artistic symbolisms of religion are presented in the painting but are also consistent with reality in a realistic setting. Such religious symbolisms include the figure of Adam and Eve, as an implication of the redemption of Jesus. The throne that the Virgin sits on as well as the Virgin’s position on the throne indicates her humility; the enclosed garden, similarly, symbolizes her purity (Smee).

In this piece of art, Rogier Van Der Weyden carefully considered the spatial construction of objects and realistic spatial perspectives. This allows him to create a painting with objective, relatively accurate three-dimensional spacing. Through two different light sources, Rogier strategically illustrates the contrast between light and shadow without undermining the overall tone of the painting, successfully demonstrating three-dimensional figures (the Virgin Mary, baby Jesus, and St. Luke). By creating various gestures of the figures, the painting humanizes the figures, which emphasizes their characteristics and creates a compelling narrative. Together, the

spatial construction, light and shadow, and the vivid depiction of figures exemplify the idea of narrative painting by Leon Battista Alberti in *De Pictura*. In conclusion, being a striking and powerful work of art, notable for its technical skill in space, color, light, and shadow, the iconography of figures, and symbolic richness, “Saint Luke Drawing the Virgin” highlights devotion and divine inspiration, as well as the preciousness of artistic creation.

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