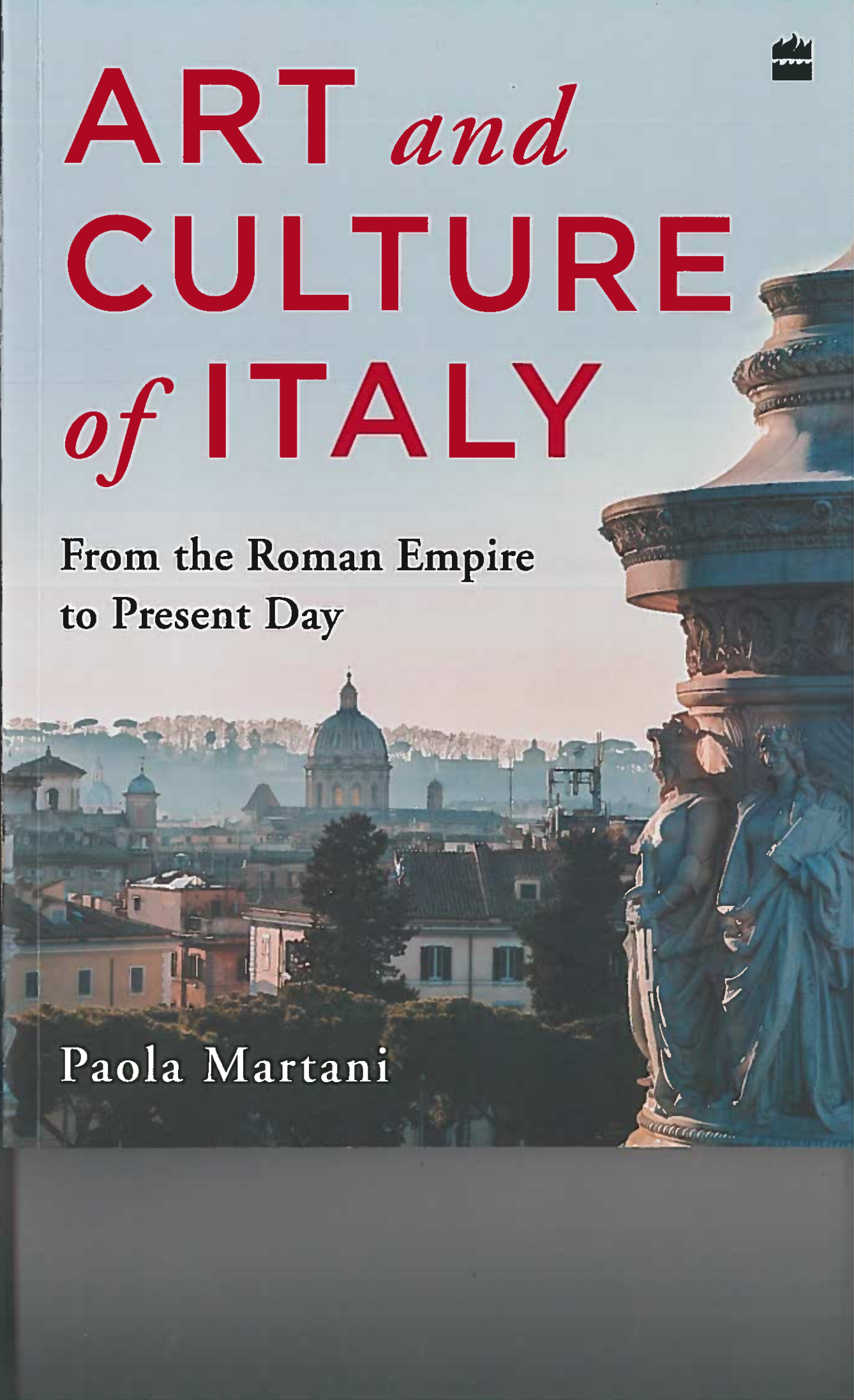




# ART *and* CULTURE *of* ITALY

From the Roman Empire  
to Present Day

Paola Martani



Language, art, poetry, philosophy and architecture – all these elements symbolize the way a society expresses itself. To an observer, the shapes used for art, the materials used for buildings, the philosophy enshrined in books, and the religion followed by the people, all come together to embody the greatness and history of a civilization – and Italy has it all. From the Roman Empire to the Sistine Chapel to Michelangelo's David, Italy has been the cradle of numerous cultural and social developments spanning centuries.

This book will introduce the reader to the history and concept of the culture of Italy through its beauty, harmony, aesthetic balance, and historical and ideological perspective.

Professor Paola Martani, together with her students from the Mass Communication Research Department of Jamia Millia Islamia University, and with the support of the Italian Embassy Cultural Centre, New Delhi, presents in these pages a summary of Italian ideas and historical innovations, creating a journey through the figurative art, history, and literature of the country.

## Art and Culture of Italy



Paola Martani holds the academic title of 'dottore in filosofia' from Università degli Studi di Milano, as well as an Mphil in Linguistics. Since 2014, she has been the course coordinator and lecturer at the Italian Embassy Cultural Centre at New Delhi. She is a lecturer in many universities, and additionally teaches at Jamia Millia Islamia since 2018. She has three books to her credit; *A Student Handbook of Italian – Learning Italian through Design A1*, *A Student Handbook of Italian – Learning Italian through Design A2*, and *Travelling between Fables*, which has also been translated into Italian. In April 2018, she was awarded for her work by the Women Economic Forum. She also writes a bi-monthly column, Culture and Influence, in *AsiaOne*.

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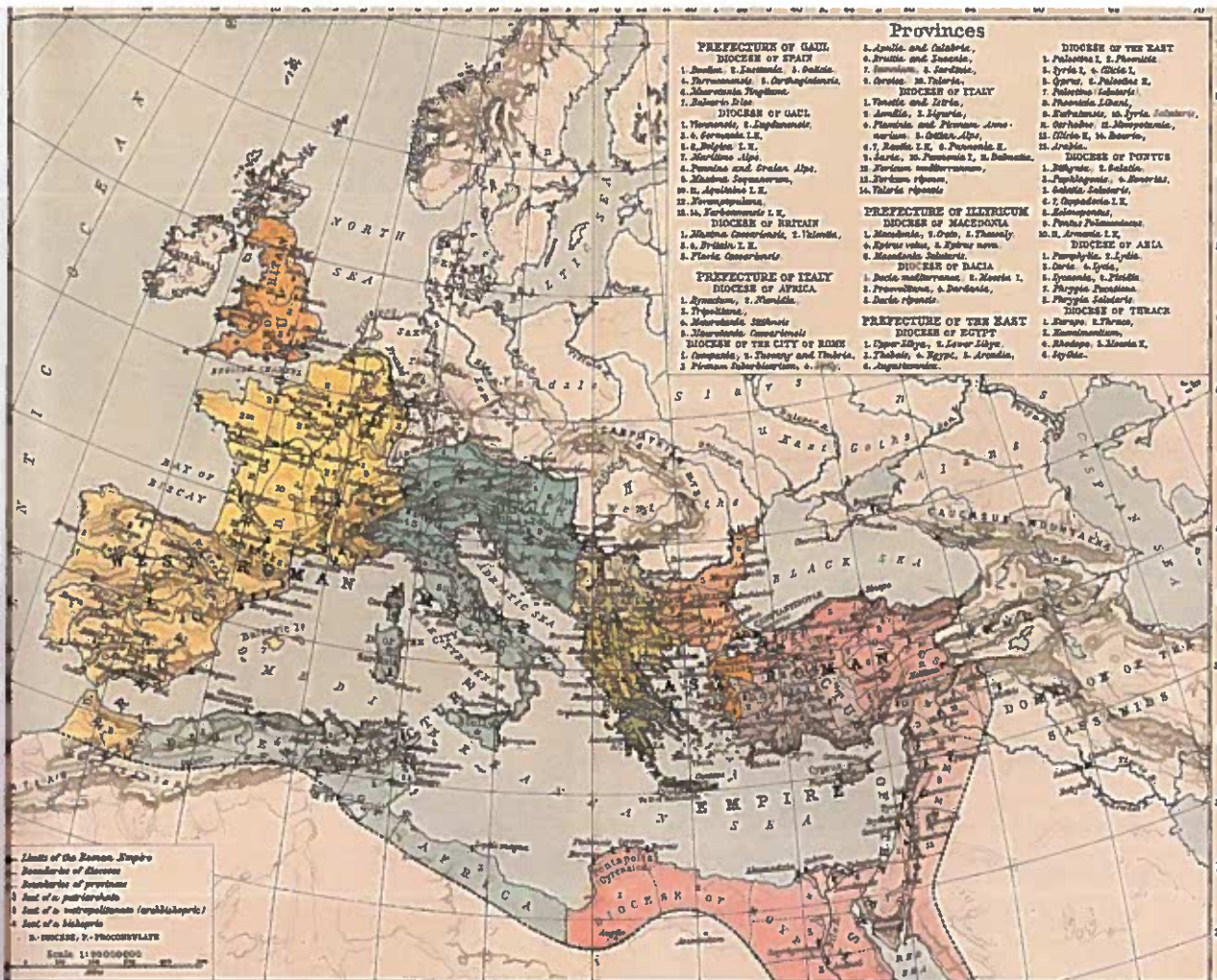
## Foreword

In August 2018, the AJ Kidwai Mass Communication Research Centre (AJK MCRC), Jamia Millia Islamia, introduced the 'Art and Culture of Italy' course as a part of their Master's programme. Based on their studies and experiences, the students created an academic book along with guest professor, Dr Paola Martani.

*Art and Culture of Italy* is a celebration of many interacting art forms, from sculpture and painting to architecture, literature, and music. Spanning across centuries of Italian history, it is a tribute to the beauty and culture of the country. The pages of the book are rich with beautiful images and illustrations, as well as fascinating historical details, which provide context for the discussion of each era's artistic production. Through this book, readers will gain a wide and interesting understanding of the history and characteristics of the Italian arts.



(Prof. Iftekhar Ahmed)



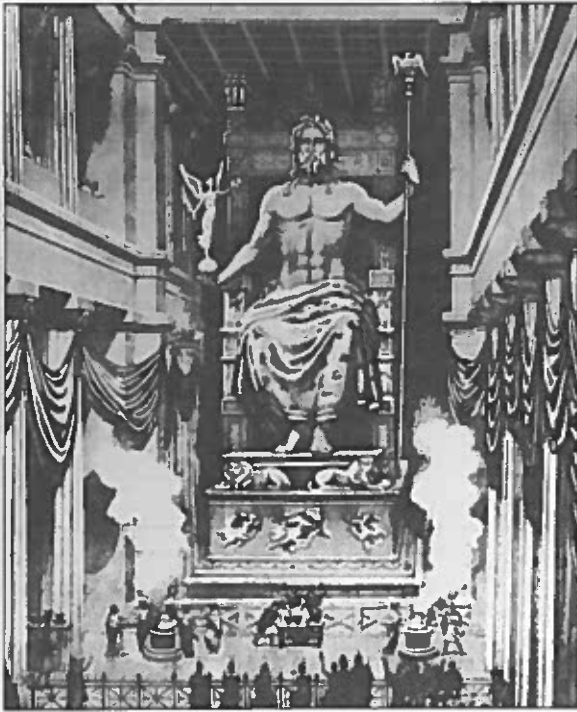
Map of the Roman Empire about 395 CE

## The Roman Period

Roman society started to spread in the eighth century BCE, and by the Year 0 (The year of the birth of Jesus), Romans had already conquered all the areas surrounding the Mediterranean Sea. However, the birth of Jesus Christ marked the beginning of a religion that opposed all that Roman civilization stood for, shaking it to its very foundations.

During the Roman civilization, the city of Rome was considered to be the centre of the world. Based on a pyramid hierarchy, Roman society did not consider all men equal. Strength, order and discipline were valued, so men with these characteristics had higher status in society. People who were a part of the Roman empire, but not from Rome itself, were considered to be from the provinces. They were not held at the same level as people from the capital and were considered 'provincial'. People from beyond the provinces were simply considered barbarians. Romans were a military-based society and aimed to conquer much of the world around them. Glory lay not in death, but in the immortality of the empire.





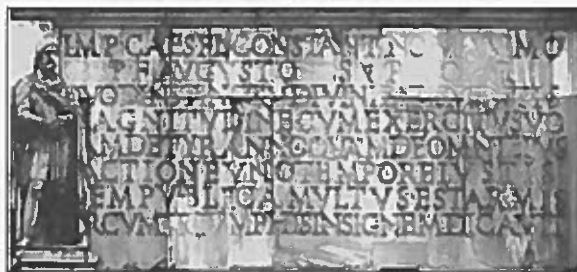
*The Roman God, Zeus*

The first step in analysing any society is to observe its religion. In Roman society, Gods were depicted as men and women, and considered to have human behaviours and emotions. They weren't perfect; they were a representation of human feelings, of a period of the life of a person. One might represent love, another Spring, another war, (Venus, Mars...) etc. This transformation of the divine into the mundane led the Romans to understand that the focal point of their society was the human being itself, to the extent that the gods became a mere extension or expression of human passion, quality, ability and propensities.

Christianity was completely different from the religion of the Ancient Romans. Roman religion, like its society, was anthropomorphic, centring on man and his passions. The gods of the Roman pantheon were depicted as men and women. The monotheistic religion of Christianity was founded on the principle that all people were equal, that God was an omnipresent deity without a human form and the centre of Christian

culture. Biblical phrases: 'with more ease an elephant will enter the crack of a door compared to the rich who will try to enter the kingdom of heaven' and 'the last will be the first' emphasized the position of men in the eyes of God. Jesus Christ, the son of God, was the closest direct link to humanity. Such a religion upset the existing pyramid of Roman society which placed heavy distinction between men as 'Romans' versus 'the conquered people'.

With the force of Christianity pushing up from the south and the barbaric invasion pushing down from the north, the Roman Empire fell in in 476 CE.



*Constantino's Arch on the Roman forum*

## Language

The official language of the empire was Latin, commonly spoken around the Mediterranean. However, as the empire began to fall, the provinces began to speak their own dialects, creating a substratum (sostrato), resulting in overlapping languages: Latin and its dialects. The substratum created what are called Roman languages which we know today as Spanish, French, Italian, etc.

# Renaissance Art

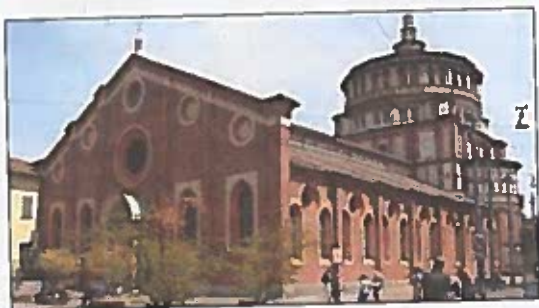
It was in art that the spirit of the Renaissance achieved its sharpest formulation. Art came to be seen as a branch of knowledge, valuable in its own right and capable of insights into man's position in the universe. In the hands of men such as Leonardo da Vinci it was even a science, a means for exploring nature and a record of discoveries. Art was to be based on the observation of the visible world and practised according to mathematical principles of balance, harmony, and perspective, which were developed at this time.



Sketch by Leonardo Da Vinci

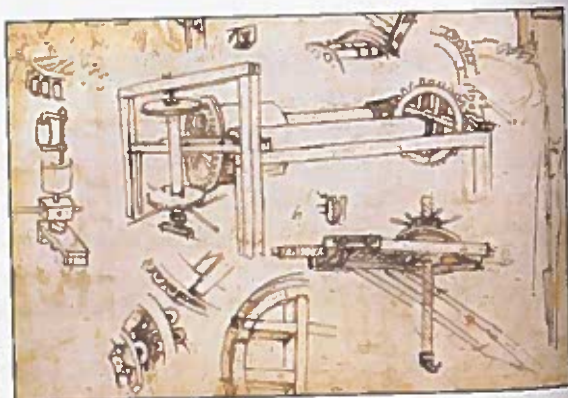
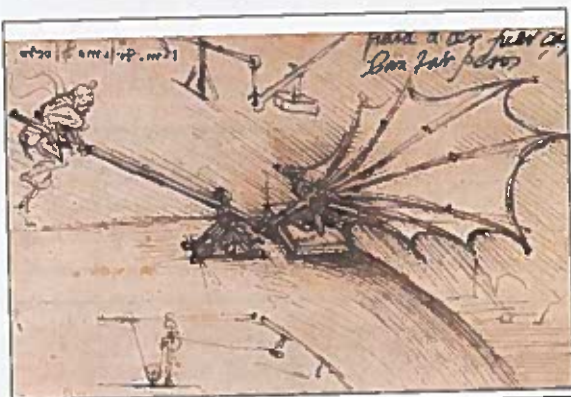
Donato Bramante (1444) worked in Lombardy and Rome. Bramante expresses himself more fully in architectural language, of which he was a great innovator in the classical sense, synthesizing the laws of configuration (founded on the relationship between the historical situation in use of classical orders and their combinations) within structures carefully calibrated from the point of view of spatial relationships. The study of ancient classical building led him to use classical architectural forms to create balance and harmony. Among his most important works are: the Santa Maria Delle Grazie in Milan, and San Pietro in Montorio, in which Bramante is inspired by the classic round system.

## Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519)



The Santa Maria Delle Grazie, Milan

Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519) began his apprenticeship in the Verrocchio workshop, one of the most famous in the city of Florence. To define him as a painter alone is reductive, as he embodies in full sense the ideal of the artist at 360 degrees: an inventor, sculptor, architect, and engineer in Florence, Milan, and France. He left, in testimony to his universal genius, a large number of manuscripts and drawings relating to his studies of anatomy, botany, mechanics, geometry, engineering.



Leonardo da Vinci's Sketches

## The Cenacle (1495–1497)

The Cenacle (1495–1497) is a fresco located in the refectory of the convent of Santa Maria Delle Grazie in Milan. Also called 'The Last Supper', it is a work in tempera and oil, patronized by the Duke of Milan. Leonardo rejects the traditional procedure of fresh painting that does not allow for second thoughts. Experimenting with his technique, he works on dry plaster with colours similar to those he uses for the boards. The result is that the colour already begins to fade while he is working on it. The scene is taken from the gospel of John, in which Jesus announces that he will be betrayed by one of his disciples. The moment that Leonardo chooses is when Jesus says the phrase: 'One of you will betray me.'



*The Last Supper, Tempera and Oil, Louvre*



*Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa*

## The Mona Lisa (1503–1506)

This famous portrait is a key example of Leonardesque naturalism, found in the fading of colours and tones and in the calibrated chiaroscuro game of composition. The painting that shows a woman with a pensive expression and a slight smile. The expression of the face is due to the use of the gradient and the corners of the eyes and the mouth, giving the painting an air of mystery. The enigmatic smile is central to the painting. The subtle and elusive psychological definition of Mona Lisa provides a strong expression of the intimate essence of the human person, a mirror of the soul.

## Raffaello Sanzio (1483–1520)

Raffaello Sanzio (1483–1520) Raphael's drawing is expressed above all in painting, where he manages to achieve his ideal of formal perfection: chromatic balance and an expressive sweetness of faces and limbs. For Raphael, architecture and decoration come together in the classic beauty of the imperial monuments: the architectural structures are embellished by dense decoration in stucco fresco, inspired by the style of the Roman caves from the Domus area. Works to remember are the 'The Marriage of the Virgin': composed in 1504, the last among the altarpieces made for the church of the city of Castello, and the first work dated and signed by the artist. At the centre of the composition is the figure of the priest who holds the wrists of Joseph and Mary. Raphael constitutes the scene on the prevalence of the curved line.



## Conclusion

Globalization has hastened processes of cultural exchanges around the world. However, ideas, since the beginning of human civilization, have always circulated, especially those related to military scope, trade opportunities and aspirational values.

There are cultures which have been 'stronger', and have spread and influenced in a much more consistent way than others, especially in the domains of the arts, architecture, literature and innovation.

Italy is one of those cultures which has been particularly strong, and, from the era of Romans to the contemporary Made in Italy campaign, its ideas and historical innovations have been exported and adopted all over the world. Italy is a very tiny country, yet it has had a profound impact on world history and culture.

I believe that this has not happened because of some fortuitous coincidence; Italy has developed a very effective cultural model out of very specific and unique processes. Such processes can be examined, learnt, and used in the development of innovative and special designs.

What is language? What is art? Poetry? Philosophy? Architecture? They are all expressions. Expressions of a mindset, of either a person or a society. Language shows which path a person will follow to reach a certain point; if we focus on the creation of a single man, in terms of art, we can draw the main line of his spirit, of his inner philosophy, of his thoughts. If we observe, on the other hand, what a society creates—the shapes used, the materials used, the religion they follow—most likely we will be able to draw the main line of the foundation that the society is constructed on.

Let's start from the Romans: a civilization which spanned over 1200 years. Without going too far into the specifics, we can consider the Roman period as a macroblock (without going into the various phases which characterized this era) and thus quickly analyse its outcomes. Let's start by looking horizontally at the Roman city map. We find ourselves in front of a network of parallel lines that intersect perpendicularly with others, forming a structure of order, rigour and discipline. Looking vertically up at the buildings, we notice that they are built with large blocks of stone, which conveys the idea and intent of stability, strength and desire for eternity.

The religion. One of the key aspects in studying a group of people is to consider their God, their idea of perfection and their aspiration. The Romans had an anthropomorphic, polytheistic religion that painted the gods as a representation of human passion, with features and human behaviour.

Here the observation of a few outcomes allows us to create an outline of the society we are facing. A military society, with man as the centre of attention. What kind of man? A military man, who finds himself on order, discipline and strength. A citizen, who is a public man and interested in public affairs. How do we notice this? From the mapping of the spaces in which the city is formed; in this case, a city that prefers and gives importance to common areas. Examples include the Colosseum, an amphitheatre where games for the population were organized (note the difference compared with Greece, where the amphitheatre was intended for the theatre, now it is destined for gladiators who conquer life, proper to military society), the pantheon, and the thermal baths.



But if the individual is the microcosm of society, this proposition can be seen in the macrocosm of the city and of the house.

The rooms of the Roman house all adjoined the atrium (the living room), where people met. In accordance with the ideas of the perfect military, practical society, furnishings were kept simple and practical, while all that was useful (including hot water) was engineered to sophisticated levels.

Following this scheme, we could retrace the whole of history by simply observing the various disciplines, building a skeleton of each society and seeing how the ideas which ran through each historical period were common to all the arts, simply communicated in different languages.

I could continue in this analysis approaching the year zero, the birth year of Jesus Christ, and point out to you how the religion preached in the Middle East was one of the causes of the fall of an empire founded on gerachia (remember that the only citizens with rights were the Romans themselves, not the other people from the provinces). Christianity, on the other hand, is a religion based on the idea that we are all children of God, an idea that levelled the population and created an ideological conflict that pushed to the south-east of the empire, just as in the north-east there was a real danger: the barbarians.

But what happens when an empire falls? To answer this, you have to take a piece of paper and fold it to the left for a long period of time, applying considerable force. In order to have the same sheet stretched out again, you must bend it in the opposite direction for an equally long period of time, applying the same power (or greater power if you want to speed up the operation).

Here's what it is, what I have decided to define as a historical knot. The period in which the sheet must be folded in the opposite direction. That period which is also the transition between the Roman era and the Middle Ages: where the centre of attention is completely distorted, passing from man to God, without intermediate phases.

The moment that sees passing from one extremity to another: from complete pride in human forms (as represented in a Roman fresco of naked women) to a pious and almost nonexistent art (the high medieval era). I refer to the appearance of art which shows human skill; I beg you not to misunderstand my words by thinking that in the early Middle Ages, there is no art. Personally, I do not agree with using the term 'Dark Ages' to define this era; on the contrary, I have always supported the beauty of the work of the amanuensis monks, not to mention the love I have felt reading Dionigi Aeropagita or San Agostino, with *The City of God*.

We see an attempt to share these two extremes, man and God, with St Francis of Assisi, who praises God through his creatures, and what is the creature par excellence if not that in his image and likeness? This attempt is developed first by the poets of the Sicilian school and then by the Dolce Stil Novo movement, which raises the woman to the position of an intermediary between God and man, an angel, until eventually that characteristic common to both, love, is found, which brings them together and gives again dignity to the human being. We see the circle returning almost to the point of its departure, but this is a richer starting point containing the beginning, the end and the path (in the Renaissance) where man, in his genius, returns to the scene.

A historical knot which lasts for centuries, and that marks, in all the arts, the various steps of an incredible journey of emotions.

There are many historical nodes in this history, and the reader, I am certain, through the exposure to all of the outcomes in the various disciplines which are collected in chapters spanning the centuries- will be able to catch them only by reading.

If I may give a suggestion:

Baroque? When someone opposes you, isn't your first reaction to defend yourself?

The macrocosm is a mirror of the microcosm, so generally, when we have difficulties in understanding, we should just stop a moment and think about the reaction we would have had if the situation had involved us. Isn't Baroque the period directly after the spread of the new religion of Martin Luther? And didn't it spread so fast thanks to the invention of the printing press? Could we see the Baroque as a reaction to an opposing ideology and the attempt to remake our beliefs?

Or... Why does the 1700s chapter not have many pictures? Why is there only figurative art and plain views of the city? Wasn't this the century where the mind is at the centre and logical thinking takes place? But art, in all its forms, comes from emotion, so maybe it shouldn't surprise us that in this the age of the mind, the treatises abound while the paintings and the poetry are blurred. If one extreme requires another before equilibrium can be reached, is not it obvious to see why Romanticism follows the Age of Enlightenment?

I would also advise you to dwell on the figurative arts before and after the invention of photography. You have certainly noticed that until then, the aim of art was to capture reality at its best. But if this goal is achieved by a machine, what will be the destiny of an art which no longer has a purpose? It must surely fail to compare the perfection of a photograph, and so we see how the arts are directed towards an object that a machine can not grasp: the unconscious and the internal movements. This new kingdom explored by Dadaism and by Futurism, which captures what photography cannot: movement. I could go on and on into the details of each historical period, examining with you the beauty of Expressionism in all its forms; I would do it but I do not want to distract you from your journey and your reflections.

I believe that all people gravely need to gain an understanding of art, its harmony, balance, creativity and fantasy, through a study of all the concepts of every field of art. Unfortunately, many syllabi throw the reader deep into the throes of one particular form of art, without lingering, even briefly, on the genesis of the creative process, or how the same ideas are carried out across art forms during a particular period of time.

A study of all the arts together, across the different periods of history, will enhance our natural ability to perceive beauty (despite the fact that this is a subjective evaluation). Being educated about the different concepts of beauty and harmony shall enable the reader to raise their awareness from the mundane.

Interestingly, 'art' is a well-defined process which can broken down into easily graspable cognitive steps:

Step One, Poiesis: This describes the fundamental inspiration of the artist in the artistic process;

Step Two, Mimesis: This is the expression of the masterpiece itself;

Step Three, Katharsis: This creates the link with the final effect, or, how the final product is or will be perceived by the public.

These three steps takes us to an aesthetical judgement, which is essentially a judgement of taste, and like all judgements, it is an evaluation of quality, quantity, relation and modality. But the aesthetic judgement differs from others: it is neither private nor shared. It is subjective, common sense, it does not claim that everyone should agree to a certain concept, but it also allows others' opinions to co-exist. So while Aesthetics cannot be imposed through dictation, it can be cultured through appropriate training.

This book focuses on Italy and its major historical nodes, those particular relevant peaks of Italian history when the most significant innovations and ideas were produced and spread. Through history, we investigate these Italian historical nodes, and use them to develop new ideas for the future. The book will use the strategy of looking backwards at classic immortal models in order to consciously look forward.

The aim is to allow the reader to develop his own ideas and emotions in the present, with reference to their understanding and study of the Italian historical nodes and their most important principles. The objective is to teach the reader how to create a sense of purpose and feeling in a specific context.

The book will span various fields of the arts; will introduce the students to the concept of the culture of Italy: its beauty, harmony, aesthetic balance, and historical and ideological perspective. It will also provide an understanding of the basic concepts of Italian art, architecture and design.

How powerfully and concretely do ideas influence modern life?

How does learning to observe and to share a piece of our soul in our creation (whatever that is) influence our outcomes?

How powerful will our outcome be if we place our soul into it?

I bet on celebrating Italy.

I bet on whoever will honour the beauties of Italy.

I bet on whoever celebrates Italy.

I bet that unifying the Italian cultural model with our nature will create wonders.