

PAPER ASSIGNMENT 1

The paintings you will be writing on are usually displayed on the 2nd floor of the Beck building of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. You are not expected to visit the museum in person: you will find digital images of these paintings by searching on the official website of the MFAH. Note that you can zoom-in to look at the paintings up close.

Your paper (five pages, double-spaced, typed) will be a formal (i.e., visual or stylistic) comparison of two paintings in the MFAH, both representing the Virgin Mary and the Christ Child. It will also incorporate some “contextual” analysis of the paintings, relating them to the broader artistic and religious culture of medieval and Renaissance Italy. But it is not a research paper in the sense that the only information you need is what you know from the Gardner text, class lectures, and close visual observation of the paintings. For advice about the form and organization of the paper, please also refer to the separate document on Blackboard, “Guidance on Writing the Paper”. Beneath the identifying information for both paintings below, I list several questions you should discuss in your paper:

(Room 201, Isla and rThomas R. Reckling III Gallery, Beck Building):

Master of the Straus Madonna

Italian (Florence), late 14th—early 15th century

Madonna and Child of the Goldfinch, before 1405

Tempera and gold leaf on panel

The Edith A. and Percy S. Straus Collection 44.565

(Room 205, Vinson and Elkins LLP Gallery, Beck Building)

Antoniazio Romano

Italian (Roman), c. 1430-1512

Virgin and Child with a Donor, c. 1475-80

Tempera and gold leaf on wood

The Edith A. and Percy S. Straus Collection 44.551

The iconography of both paintings is similar, even including the goldfinch (about which you can read more in one of the wall labels), and the “Ave Maria, etc.” inscription. This will allow you to make close visual comparisons between the two paintings, in which you can explore the development of pictorial style from the “late medieval” or “proto-Renaissance” fourteenth/very early fifteenth-century period in Italian painting (the period of Giotto, etc.) to the later fifteenth century in Italian painting (sometimes termed the “early Renaissance”). This stylistic development, as exemplified in these two paintings, will be the main theme of your paper. Concentrate on the following points:

1) Compare the Straus Madonna, as an example of a style influenced by Giotto, with the earlier Italo-Byzantine style. You might make specific visual comparisons here with Berlinghieri’s St. Francis painting in the Gardner text. In what ways does the Straus Madonna continue some of the characteristics of the Byzantine manner, but also reflect the naturalism of the new style? Talk about stylistic similarities (as well as differences) you see between the Strauss Madonna and Giotto’s *Madonna Enthroned* altarpiece in the Gardner text. This might include certain visual qualities—how each artist represents and

gives the illusion of three-dimensional form and space—as well as any other significant differences and similarities you see between the two artists.

2) Compare the Straus Madonna to Antoniazio Romano's Madonna with regard to the representation of three-dimensional form and space. What is similar, and what is different, about each artist's naturalism? Look at specific visual qualities. Note that Romano seems to add some illusionistic tricks: areas of reflected light, clearly-cast shadows and so on. Can you relate Romano's style to the naturalism of fifteenth-century Italian painting as described in Gardner? You might make comparisons here with specific fifteenth-century Italian paintings in Gardner. Is there something more "precise" or "mathematical" about his representation of form and space than in the Straus Master's work? Think about the stylistic qualities of other artists of this period, the advances in naturalism, the new interest in perspective, etc. However, despite the naturalism of Romano's style, note that in certain respects he retains—in the depiction of the donor—an old-fashioned hierarchical scale, and that his representation of the infant Jesus standing is idealized in its own way: that is, it is quite unrealistic about how a child of this age is physically capable of standing. Indeed, the choice to have the Child stand at all is interesting: what do you make of that? You may note also that the medium of both paintings that you are comparing is tempera on wood. You might make some brief comments about the relationship between this medium and the visual quality of the paintings. Oil painting as a technique probably did not exist when the Straus master did his painting. By the late fifteenth century however certain Italian painters were beginning to use oil paints, which they had picked up from the northerners. How might the Antoniazio Romano painting have looked different if it had been done in oils?

3) Think about the relationship between Romano's painting and the more assertively classical taste of the Italian fifteenth-century Early Renaissance (in architecture as well as painting): note here the idealization of the faces and bodies in Romano's painting according to a Classical aesthetic, as well as the different architectural style of the frame, compared to the Straus Madonna's painting.

4) Compare how the Straus Madonna and the Romano painting both depict the emotional relationship between mother and child, and that between both figures and the viewer. All this may be expressed in body language, gesture, pose, facial expression and gaze. Consider how all this relates to the function of sacred images, as theorized by Christian writers of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, and the theological discussions about the nature and humanity of Christ. (I will discuss this in my lectures on fifteenth-century painting in both northern Europe and Italy.)

As you address all these questions, support your arguments with carefully defined visual observations of specific paintings, both the ones in the Museum and those in your book. Students may choose different paintings out of the book to make their comparative arguments in this sense: there is no one correct way to do this. Develop all the above points in your paper, but you need not put them in the same order that I do. Organize the paper in a logical fashion, with a clear thesis sentence at the end of the first paragraph, and a conclusion in your final paragraph.

Finally, on the title page of your paper, please include the following pledge, which reflects the definition of plagiarism followed by the University of Houston: "I pledge that in the following paper, I have not represented as my own work the work of another writer without appropriately acknowledging the source." Then type your name immediately after the pledge; this will constitute your signature.

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