**Cennino Cennini on Imitation and Emulation in Renaissance Art**

The familiar premium that contemporary Western Society places on artistic originality is actually a fairly recent phenomenon. Among the concepts Renaissance artists most valued were imitation and emulation. Although many Renaissance artists did develop unique, recognizable styles, convention in terms of both subject matter and representational practices, predominated. In a review of Italian Renaissance art certain themes, motifs, and compositions surface with great regularity and the traditional training practices reveal the importance of imitation and emulation to aspiring Renaissance artists.

***Imitation*** was the starting point in a young artist’s training. Italian renaissance artists believed that the best way to learn was to copy the works of masters. Accordingly much of an apprentice’s training consisted of copying exemplary artworks. Leonardo da Vinci filled his sketchbooks with drawings of well-known sculptures and frescoes, and Michelangelo spent days sketching artworks in churches and around Florence and Rome.

***Emulation*** was the next step, which involved modeling one’s art after that of another artist. Although imitation still provided the foundation for this practice, an artist used features of another’s art only as a springboard for improvements or innovations. Thus, developing artists went beyond previous artists and attempted to prove their own competence and skill by improving on established and recognized masters. Comparison and a degree of competition were integral to emulation. To evaluate the “improved” artwork, viewers had to know the original “model.”

Renaissance artist believed that developing artists would ultimately arrive at their own unique style through this process of imitation and emulation. Cennino Cennini (c. 1370-1440) explained the value of this training procedure in a book he published in 1400, *Il Libro dell’Artes* (The Artist’s Handbook ),

Which served as a practical guide to producing art:

Having first practiced drawing for a while,… take pains and pleasure in constantly copying the best things which you can find done by the hand of great masters. And if you are in a place where many good masters have been, so much the better for you. But I give you this advice; take care to select the best on every time, and the one who has the greatest reputation. And, as you go on from day to day, it will be against nature if you do not get some grasp on his style and of his spirit. For if you undertake to copy after one master today and after another one tomorrow, you will not acquire the style of either one or the other, and you will inevitably, through enthusiasm, become capricious, because each style will be distracting your mind. You will try to work in this man’s way today and in the other’s tomorrow, and so you will not get either of them right. If you follow the course of one man through constant practice, your intelligence would have to be crude indeed for you do not to get some nourishment from it. Then you will find if nature has granted you any imagination at all that that you will eventually acquire a style individual to yourself, and it cannot help being good; because your hand and your mind, being always accustomed to gather flowers, would ill know how to pluck thorns.\*

\*Kleiner, Fred*. Gardner’s Art Through the Ages*. “Italy 15th and 16th Century Art.” Wadsworth, Cengage Learning. Boston. 2009. 49.

\*Translated by Daniel V. Thompson Jr., Cennino Cennini, The Artist’s Handbook, (Il Libro dell’Arte, (New York: Dover Publications, 1960; reprint of 1933 ed.), 14-15