

FL 216

Assignment 3

The French Renaissance was a time when the realized ideals of antiquity came to fruition in the form of new ideas such as humanism, emphasis on the individual, and the re-emergence of the classics in art, architecture, and philosophy.¹ While the Middle Ages saw invasion, plague, crumbling institutions, ruling families overturned, war, and class division, the Renaissance saw radical change and new discoveries.² The *Nymphs on the Fontaine des Innocents* from the Musée du Louvre in Paris is a fantastic piece of French sculpture that can be viewed as a crossroads between the cultural and artistic style of the Middle Ages and the more classical style of the French Renaissance that paved the way to the value system of the modern world.

Referred to as a time of “rebirth,” the Renaissance placed renewed interest on the study of human knowledge, which became known as humanism (from Latin *studia humanitatis*).³ Beginning in the mid-15th century, European scholars began fervently seeking knowledge about the world around them. Art work became more realistic, exploration and expansion of new exotic locations intensified, and the pursuit of knowledge as it related to the human mind and body gave birth to what many historians refer to as the beginning of modern history.⁴ The Renaissance began in northern Italy before it spread to France and the rest of Europe. An entire new paradigm emerged as art became more realistic and less focused on religion, wealthy families became patrons who commissioned artwork, artists and musicians focused on expression of emotions, and philosophers questioned existence in a way that had never been

¹ Neal, Lisa. France: An Illustrated History. New York: Hippocrene Books, Inc, 2001.

² Ibid.

³ Grout, Donald J., James P. Burkholder, and Claude V. Palisca. A History of Western Music. : W.W. Norton & Company, 2005.

⁴ Dowling, Mike. The Renaissance. 5 Jan. 2005. 17 February 2009 <http://www.mrdowling.com/704renaissance.html>

experienced before.⁵ The human body was celebrated, as depicted in nude portraits and statues that emphasized the beauty of the human figure, moving away from the shame in it that was emphasized in early medieval artwork.

Jean Goujon's, *Nymphs from the Fontaine des Innocents* shows a blending of the cultural and artistic traditions of the Middle Ages while looking towards Renaissance principles in its choice matter and composition. The façade of the fountain is comprised of several nymphs, defined in Greek mythology as a beautiful maiden inhabiting nature.⁶ Using a classical Greek creature as subject matter, sculpting individual features, and celebrating the human body are stylistically linked to the emerging Renaissance style; however, the fact that the Nymphs remain clothed (in contrast to the depiction of nude nymphs in modern artwork) is a remnant of the artistic style of the Middle Ages (in which the human body was not celebrated).

The return to the Classics brought with it clarity of structure that became an important design technique during the Renaissance. Particularly in architecture, lines and forms took on a more structured appearance, and advances in mathematics brought the field of design to a more exact science. According to David Mayernik, "Classical repertoire of forms emerged metamorphically from the presumed principles of old forms. Precedents didn't justify forms, but rather formed a culture of building, a pantheon of forebears, and a challenge to emulation."⁷ The composition of the *Fontaine des Innocents* is very classical in its layout, yet it is located in a place that was central to the medieval city (close to the marketplace). It has symmetrical columns and stairs and uses a domed roof (arch) which is a common shape in ancient Greece structures, yet it celebrates a cemetery closely linked to the church (the Christian church being the most

⁵ Ibid.

⁶"nymph." *The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition*. Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004. 19 Feb. 2009. Dictionary.com <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/nymph>

⁷ A View on Cities. *Fontaine Des Innocents*. 2009. 17 Feb. 2000
<http://www.aviewoncities.com/paris/fontainedesinnocents.htm>

important source out of which Medieval art grew).⁸ Clearly, there are more Renaissance design features in the fountain than there are Medieval, proving that the art and architecture of the French Renaissance evolved from the Middle Ages and developed into something greater.

Ultimately, the *Nymphs from the Fontaine des Innocents* shows how the French Renaissance evolved from and developed beyond the artistic and cultural traditions of the Middle Ages in that it shows an increased emphasis on individual features (a result of humanism) and classical subjects, while retaining some of the artistic traditions of earlier centuries. The use of classical Greek architecture in the fountain pays homage to the “rebirth” that led to so many new discoveries during the Renaissance and eventually caused the demise of the Middle Ages, bringing with it the advent of a modern value system.⁹

⁸ Wikipedia. Medieval Art. 8 Feb. 2009. 17 Feb. 2009 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Medieval_art

⁹ Fein, David A. French Art History. 2009. 17 Feb. 2009 <http://www.uncg.edu/rom/courses/dafein/civ/art.htm>



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¹⁰ Goujon, Jean, Nymphs from Fontaine des innocents, 1547-49. Musee du Louvre, Paris. 17 February 2009. <http://www.wga.hu/support/viewer/z.html>