

Influence and Implications of Renaissance Humanism
in Leonardo da Vinci's *Paragone**

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Leonardo da Vinci's treatise on artistic practice, the *Paragone*, placed within the wider context of the development of European intellectual and artistic thought, may be considered to be a continuation of a broader humanist movement within the Renaissance period. This assertion, however, is only accurate in part; closer examination of the detail of Leonardo's work reveals a twofold nature, reflecting the corresponding duality of the renaissance conception of humanism. On the one hand, Leonardo's treatise appears to radicalise existing humanist concerns, in particular the emphasis upon the conception of the human being, as opposed to divinity, as the immanent centre of knowledge. Yet the text simultaneously adheres to an implicit condition of renaissance humanism, which consented to the ultimate superiority of the Divine, at the expense of the human being. The object of this study is to examine the radical quality of Leonardo's *Paragone*, both socially and intellectually, within the context of an ultimately inhibiting epistemology.

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I.

Characterised as a “re-discovery” of ancient attitudes to art, philosophy and modes of rhetoric, humanism in fifteenth-century Italy was considered to be both a redefinition of intellectual priorities, and a celebration of Italian heritage. *Humanista*, a derivation of fifteenth-century slang, referred to a professional teacher of the *studia humanitatis*, encompassing the fields of “grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history and ethics.”¹ Given this field of study, therefore, it is unsurprising that the rise in the acceptance of humanist thought heralded a subtle shift in intellectual activity from the epistemological centrality of the Divine, a view presented by institutionalised religious doctrine, and towards a focus upon the creative human being.

However, there existed a crucial internal contradiction within the conception, and reception, of humanist thought within the Renaissance. The term *humanitas*, as it appears within the Renaissance period, conceals a dual meaning: the combination of two different perspectives, arising from its use in earlier Roman and Medieval contexts.² In Roman use, *humanitas* referred to the positive qualities demonstrated by the human being, distinguishing humans as superior to those beings determined as less-than human; alternatively, medieval interpreters considered the term to identify the negative relationship characterised by the inferiority of the human before the divine.³ Both forms, however, co-exist within the renaissance interpretation of the term *humanitas*, a residue of the dual sources of influence characteristic of this period. As such, the renaissance conception of *humanitas* simultaneously delineates both value and limitation.⁴

The priority given to the pagan, Ancient Greek language by the medieval scholar Erasmus, at the expense of institutional Latin, has often been considered to be the paradigm of humanism’s gradually emergent, continental shift. However, the trend towards the centrality of man within knowledge developed within the Italian Renaissance through the arts, and principally through painting. Ironically, the rise of humanism within Italy was made possible, and encouraged to develop and expand, through the assistance and resources of those whose ideological authority humanism most threatened: the clergy, through the religious patronage of the arts.

Religious, artistic patronage originated principally in thirteenth century Italian mendicant orders, or “begging Friars.”⁵ Members of these collectives undertook a vow of communal poverty, although they were permitted to beg for alms, which would subsequently finance the commission of artworks (principally architectural and painted works). Perhaps even more significantly, these collections were themselves authorised by the Roman Catholic Church, in the form of a Papal Bull in 1253 by Pope Innocent IV.⁶ The success of

these collections led to a rise in Mendicant collectives across Italy, and the emergence of a powerful network of patrons.

During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the re-emergence of principally Roman philosophy and morality within the Italian community gave rise to the conception of true nobility as the product of a “noble heart.”⁷ While there is some suggestion that this attitude may have been profitably requisitioned by mendicant orders, who promoted a release from one's sins in return for charitable donations, the significance of a “noble heart” became especially acute for merchant families of recent wealth.⁸ Patronage demonstrated one's nobility, and proved to be an alternative to (fictitious) Roman familial heritage, or military background, for merchant families who had neither, and required justification for their recent rise in social status.⁹

The increased proliferation of independently wealthy patrons led to heightened competition between artists for commissions, and humanist rhetoric became an essential tool of competition and persuasion for artists.¹⁰ Correspondingly, artists experienced new degrees of creative liberty, albeit commercially enforced. Increased consideration was afforded to artistic experimentation in order to achieve prominence before potential patrons. However, invention which did not fulfill expectations would be unlikely to attract further patronage, and as such the ultimate determining factor at this point was financial, rather than purely creative.

Religious iconography, and painted works generally, maintained a powerful, ideological role within the Renaissance; and just as humanist rhetoricians were utilised to support local governance, painters were often commissioned to produce works which would provide a source of political and religious justification. Similarly, a crucial factor influencing religious artistic patronage was the use of works as a medium of interpretation and instruction. Paintings were requisitioned by churches for ideological interpretation by clergy to a largely illiterate congregation. They also played the role, in early mendicant churches, of “screening” the separate divisions of the church: the common assembly, the church choir, and the Friars' choir, effecting a division “from the sacred to the profane.”¹¹ Therefore, the development of methods of painting which ground the illusion of perception – and which appeared to “re-create” God's own creativity – had the broad potential for public acts of subversion and manipulation. Leonardo da Vinci's *Paragone* was central in the development of a consciousness of this ideological potential amongst artisans.

II.

Although Leonardo shared with other artists the dependence upon finan-

cial patronage for survival, his experience was different from that of artists who had preceded him. Principally, as opposed to engaging in vigorous competition for limited commissions, his skill ensured that he was able to carefully choose his patrons; furthermore, his works were among the first to be collected, regardless of their content.¹² This was not, however, the case for most of his contemporaries; indeed, even as late as the sixteenth century, patrons were often considered the “makers” of the work, thus highlighting the direct conceptual association between finance and creativity, also evident in earlier associations between patronage and a “nobility of heart.”¹³

Perhaps in response to this apparent threat, Leonardo's influential work offers a paradigmatic shift in power relations from patron to the artist. His treatise demonstrates a language of process, indicative of his emphasis upon the formal, mechanical element of the artistic activity, as opposed to its subject matter or potential reception.¹⁴ Leonardo thus attempts to shift focus from the “false” productive role of the patron, to the “true” productivity of the artist; as such, he transfers power from finance to mechanical praxis.¹⁵ While the individual artist is the focus of Leonardo's analysis, his true concern is the redefinition of the artist as a *composer of form*.

This crucial shift highlights a significant discrepancy between the ideal realm of Leonardo's treatise, and social realities for the renaissance artist. Principally, this issue is manifest in the unresolved problem of the renaissance patron as “maker” of the work, in spite of Leonardo's alternative proposition and apparent resolution.

Leonardo's insufficiency in justifying the autonomy of the artist requires closer examination. As opposed to an explicit dismissal of the notion of “productive patronage,” Leonardo encourages a “narrowing of focus,” an increased specificity which does not exclude, but incorporates as *difference*, such external influence as a conditioning aspect of the artistic process.¹⁶ Significantly, the patron is relegated to the “shadows” of the artist's workshop. Leonardo's intention, and the necessity of this apparent exclusion, will be made clear through an examination of artistic techniques which Leonardo held to be the most essential; in particular, One-Point Perspective and *sfumato*.

The first artists credited with the pictorial emancipation from medieval two-dimensional painting were the thirteenth century painters Giotto and Duccio. In particular, Giotto developed a method referred to as “depth by way of empathy”; the generation of the third-dimension of depth from a two-dimensional surface through the manipulation of figures in space, rather than the manipulation of space itself.¹⁷ The illusion of depth, loosely referred to as “two-point perspective,” was achieved by Giotto through the placement of objects “slantwise” in space, with the result that the previously solid plane appeared to “lose its materiality.”¹⁸

Building upon the foundation laid by the work of Giotto and Duccio, the Florentine architect and sculptor Filippo Brunelleschi designed a successful perspectival method based upon architectural principles. This system, comprising of a ground plan and a vertical structure, has been attributed to Brunelleschi approximately fifteen years prior to the most famous proponent of perspectival design, Leon Battista Alberti.¹⁹

Considered to have been influenced by Brunelleschi's design, Alberti was the first artist to document a detailed, mathematical approach to one-point perspective.²⁰ Brunelleschi's influence is apparent in the incorporation of the vertical aspect into his pre-designed perspectival tool, a geometrical grid (*velum*), used by Alberti in a workshop.²¹ As such, the mature form of one-point perspective featured the convergence of all parallel lines into "vanishing points."²² All parallels intersecting at right angles (orthogonals) converged at a central "vanishing point," thus producing a "horizon" effect.²³

An architect by profession, though also credited with painted works of limited quality, Alberti's aim appears to have been to transfer the three dimensional aspects of architecture and sculpture into the realm of painting, as part of an anticipated historical development which would culminate in a dissolution of boundaries between humans and divine nature.²⁴ Geometric perspective, he argued, would permit man to accurately re-produce nature, with the aim of eventual transcendence.²⁵

Alberti's apparently hubristic aim of transcending nature through art emphasises the radical potential of one-point perspective. A mathematically-grounded approach, one-point perspective permits the artist to apparently "re-create" perspectival vision by scientific means, transcending merely symbolic painting.²⁶ As such, the artist equipped with this technique effectively threatened to displace God as creator of "reality"; indeed, this implication is clear in Descartes' reference to the three-dimensionality of perspective as a *substance étendue* (the implicitly continuous and infinite extension of the subject).²⁷ That which secured the centrality of God, however, was the two-dimensional nature of the canvas, which provided an implicit limit to the creativity of humans in relation to the Divine. Thus, one-point perspective remained the *illusion* of perspectival vision; as such, it concretely reinforced the impression of an ambiguity implicit within the renaissance conception of *humanitas*.

The ramifications of the development of perspective upon the perceived status of the artist were evident in the contemporary transformation of artistic schooling. Euclidean geometry, the foundation of Alberti's approach, required a greater degree of mathematical skill than was usually taught at a basic level.²⁸ In pre-Renaissance Italy, all children attended the *botteghuzza*, an early level schooling, after which the more promising children continued to at-

tend Abacus schools, in which they were taught basic mathematics and geometry, sufficient for merchant occupations.²⁹ Artist apprenticeships followed, known as *bottega*, in which students would practice in a room adjacent to their master.³⁰

The early Renaissance period witnessed a significant development in artistic tutelage. One effect of recent changes was an increase in artistic freedom, previously limited to the "liberal" arts of literature and poetry, a transformation evident within the *bottega*.³¹ Of greater significance, however, was the development of a higher level of artisanal study, the *studium*, in which higher mathematics and geometry, as well as perspective and foreshadowing, were taught.³²

Thus considered, the internal realm of artistic tutelage reflected the decentralisation of the religious realm in response to the rise of humanism. Whereas pre-renaissance tutelage had focused upon a direct, imitatory relation of the student to their master, the increasing centrality of the human as the site of knowledge witnessed a movement towards an increasing artistic independence for students. Students were taught not simply to imitate, but to *experiment*.

III.

With his *Paragone*, Leonardo stood at the intersection of humanist values, and a corresponding rise in an empirical, scientific attitude. The foundation of Leonardo's position rest upon a belief in the positive role of human, sensible experience, the epistemic centrality of human, analytic thought, and a rejection of the medieval notion of divine inspiration in favor of human intuition.

Experience was central. Leonardo associated the work of the artist with that of a scientist; as the scientist engaged in experiment, the artist ought to similarly engage with the natural world.³³ Experience was thus contrast against imagination, which Leonardo held to be the weakest aspect of the process of painting.³⁴ This contrast between the sensible and the (inferior) ephemeral, as between the known and unknown, is fundamental to Leonardo's treatise, placing it securely in accordance with the history of western philosophy since Plato, and as such re-asserting its humanist character.³⁵

Coupled with experience, Leonardo emphasised the centrality of the individual through a glorification of the visual sense.³⁶ He described vision as "the most noble sense" recollecting, and transcending, notions of a "noble heart"; within Leonardo's work, morality gives way to scientific validity.³⁷ Of principal interest for Leonardo, however, was the way in which he believed vision was directly translatable into perspectival painting. He understood visual perception as similar in function to that of a mirror, in which the "visual image" was re-

flected onto a plane surface within the eye (the "*impressiva*"), which was in turn apprehended within the imagination.³⁸ As such, the mind "possessed" the image and, through the combination of mechanical application and geometric perspective, translated directly into painting. Consequently, the image of the eye, considered to be "universally intelligible," was also scientifically verifiable.³⁹ Crucially, the path of the image from divine nature to canvas was considered to be uninterrupted.

Central to Leonardo's conception of the nature of painting, and in turn his understanding of the nature of reality, was the notion of "harmonic proportionality."⁴⁰ The foundation of this conception was Leonardo's understanding that the universe was divided into a multiplicity of minute fragments, traveling through space at extraordinary speeds.⁴¹ The apparently solid vision of the world which appears to perception is the result of the intersection of these fragments, which appear as "luminous rays," forming pyramidal shapes, which in turn intersect, forming a multiplicity of infinitely smaller pyramids.⁴²

Within Leonardo's system, the artist "captures" the image of the world at the moment at which the chaotic flux of fragments becomes untenable. As such, the artist maintains the momentary harmony of the elements, before dispersal into a myriad of other formations; the moment of time, considered as the flux of the minute elements of the universe, is held still by the artist.⁴³ Within Leonardo's conception of the art of painting, the artist holds the image intuitively, and presents it upon a two-dimensional surface, in the same way as God views the world: "at a glance."⁴⁴

However, perspective remained ground in illusion; building upon the developments of Brunelleschi and Alberti, Leonardo's *Paragone* outlines a system of representation by which a two-dimensional surface may appear similar to a three-dimensional image.⁴⁵ Whereas Alberti emphasised the significance of colour, Leonardo insists upon the chiaroscuro effect of shadow and light, combined with perspective, otherwise known as *sfumato*. Hence, "life" is insinuated through perspective – the main lines of bodies, the diminution of colours with distance, and the loss of cognition of bodies with appropriate distance – and is further *embodied* through the addition of shadow and light.⁴⁶

The apparent necessity of *sfumato* and perspective in themselves confirm the limitation of the two-dimensional surface; although both engage with the manipulation and enhancement of bodies in apparent space, their purpose is to create the illusion of space. Leonardo's use of *sfumato* appears to confirm that the third dimension remains beyond the artistic, creative reach of the painter.

Through the "realistic" presentation of the combination of light and shade, Leonardo's development of *sfumato* reinforces the dominant religious perspective, in which the individual is unable to stand within the light of all knowl-

edge. Yet Leonardo goes further, insisting that it is shadow which formally creates the image.⁴⁷ Therefore, areas of shadow and darkness, spaces which remain concealed, appear to be indicative of the limitation of human perspective before the Divine; and, by implication, it is the existence of this difference, manifest in darkness and light, which constitutes "reality."⁴⁸

This apparent limitation, despite its creative function, appears incongruous when considered in relation to Leonardo's emphasis upon the epistemological centrality of the human being; an argument which lends priority to empirical perspective, scientific experiment and experience. It is necessary to reconsider this evaluation of *sfumato*.

Throughout Leonardo's major areas of focus within the *Paragone*, there exists one principle element in common: all relate to *form* or *design*. This is clear in terms of mechanical action and geometry; yet it is also evident in his scientific consideration of optics, directly connected to mechanical application as opposed to the imagination. Similarly, in relation to *sfumato*, shadow is that which "formally creates." *Sfumato* is, therefore, a formal, design element, as much as optics or geometry. It is only secondarily "content."

Further, Leonardo's conception of vision undermines the significance of the imagination, in that it *holds* the viewed image, effectively storing it within memory while the artist mechanically transfers it from *impressiva* to canvas. The process was direct, and scientifically repeatable.⁴⁹ Leonardo argued that the painter *possesses* his object, the proportional harmony of the world. Whereas Alberti distanced man from the Divine, yet anticipated a closure of the divide, Leonardo subtly shifts focus from method alone to a combination of speculative biology and human, mechanical action; the artist does not *invent*, but *re-constitutes* divine nature.⁵⁰

This suggestion is supported by the text of the *Paragone*, manifest through Leonardo's specific avoidance of the terms *creare* and *creazione* within discussions of the relation between the human artist and the Divine; rather, Leonardo uses as an alternative the more general terms, *generare* and *generazione*. The implication is clear; the role of the artist is not to create, but to formally re-establish divine nature.

Sfumato expresses that which is implicit throughout Leonardo's treatise; in epistemological terms, it is present within the distinction between a "knowable" and positively verifiable "reality," and an "unknowable," metaphysical realm. The extent of human influence is limited to formal elements, in contrast to essential or spiritual realms. In social terms, the distinction is apparent between the formal mastery of technique by the artist, and the hidden, conditioning role of the patron.

The *Paragone* – ostensibly an instructive work for artists - thereby reveals the growing influence of empiricism, as well as a systematicity ground

by its own internal laws. Those elements which the system alienates – through their existence as oppositions which define the subject – simultaneously define the text as appropriate to a renaissance understanding of humanism.

Panofsky writes: "The Humanist rejects authority. But he respects tradition."⁵¹ The inconsistency of this statement perhaps best describes Leonardo's "conditional emancipation" of the Renaissance artist. The rejection of authority necessitates a rejection also of dominant tradition; in much the same way, a liberation of the artist would require a renunciation of traditional roles and context. Leonardo's treatise offers a theoretical freedom, principally a celebration of technical advances, as opposed to a reconfiguration of artisanal roles. Demonstrative of the repressive ambiguity within the renaissance conception of Humanism, Leonardo's text complies with a view of the human beings located at a point "in-between" the creatively oppositional poles of darkness and light.

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NOTES

¹ Michael Baxandall, *Giotto and the Orators: Humanist Observers of Painting in Italy and the Discovery of Pictorial Composition 1350-1450* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986), p. 1.

² Erwin Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1982), pp. 2-3.

³ Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, p. 3.

⁴ Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, p. 1.

⁵ Brian Kempers, *Painting, Power and Patronage: The Rise of the Professional Artist in the Italian Renaissance*, trans. Beverley Jackson (London: Allen Lane – The Penguin Press, 1992), p. 22.

⁶ Kempers, *Painting, Power and Patronage*, p. 22.

⁷ John Stephens, *The Italian Renaissance: The Origins of Intellectual and Artistic Change before the Reformation* (London & New York: Longman, 1990), p. 6.

⁸ Stephens, *The Italian Renaissance*, p. 59.

⁹ Stephens, *The Italian Renaissance*, p. 59.

¹⁰ Stephens, *The Italian Renaissance*, p. 80.

¹¹ Kempers, *Painting, Power and Patronage*, p. 36.

¹² Andre Chastel, "Introduction," *The Genius of Leonardo da Vinci: Leonardo da Vinci on Art and the Artist*, trans. Ellen Callmann (New York: The Orion Press,



1961), p. xi.

¹³ Claire Farago, *Leonardo da Vinci's Paragone: A Critical Interpretation with a New Edition of the Text in the Codex Urbinas* (Leiden, New York, København & Köln: E. J. Brill, 1992), p. 119.

¹⁴ Farago, *Leonardo da Vinci's Paragone*, p. 334.

¹⁵ Terms indicative of value, in this case "true" and "false," are appropriate within this context given the systemic structure of Leonardo's *Paragone*. Leonardo's system will be further elaborated and investigated within this paper.

¹⁶ "Process" herein refers to a mechanical, socially-ground movement.

¹⁷ Erwin Panofsky, *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1960), p. 119.

¹⁸ Panofsky, *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art*, p. 119.

¹⁹ Panofsky, *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art*, p. 123, f. 2.

²⁰ The fact that Alberti was the first to document and publish these findings does not, however, rescue him from criticism. Vasari, in particular, cites Alberti as an example of the necessity for experience as well as theoretical knowledge relating to the production of artworks; while he duly notes that Alberti published widely, he implies that the published text implies a mastery not entirely applicable to the author – "such has been the influence of his writings on the pens and speech of scholarly men that he is commonly believed to be superior to those who were, in fact, superior to him" (Giorgio Vasari, *Artists of the Renaissance*, trans. George Bull [London: Alien Lane, 1978], p. 129; cf. also, Panofsky, *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art*, p. 126, f. 2; and, Cecil Grayson, "Introduction," *On Painting and On Sculpture: The Latin Texts of De Pictura and De Statua* [London: Phaidon, 1972], p. 12).

²¹ Panofsky, *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art*, p. 126.

²² The use of the term "Vanishing Point," in this context, has been first attributed to Villard de Honnecourt; cf. Panofsky, *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art*, p. 133.

²³ Erwin Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting: Its Origins and Character* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1953), p. 5.

²⁴ Vasari suggests that "in painting Alberti achieved nothing of any great importance or beauty" (Vasari, *Artists of the Renaissance*, p. 133; see also Grayson, "Introduction," p. 18).

²⁵ Grayson, "Introduction," pp. 10,15.

²⁶ Ground in Euclidean geometry, Alberti's treatise was unique in its focus upon a contemporary understanding of Optics. Cf. Grayson, "Introduction," p. 12.

²⁷ Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting*, p. 5.

²⁸ Grayson, "Introduction," p. 12.

²⁹ Frances-Anne Ames-Lewis, *The Intellectual Life of the Early Renaissance Artist* (New Haven & London: Yale UP, 2000), pp. 30-1.

³⁰ Ames-Lewis, *The Intellectual Life of the Early Renaissance Artist*, p. 35.

- ³¹ Ames-Lewis, *The Intellectual Life of the Early Renaissance Artist*, p. 273.
- ³² Ames-Lewis, *The Intellectual Life of the Early Renaissance Artist*, p. 57.
- ³³ Leonardo da Vinci, "Parte Prima," *Leonardo da Vinci's Paragone: A Critical Interpretation with a New Edition of the Text in the Codex Urbinas*. ed. Claire Farago (Leiden, NY, København & Köln: E. J. Brill, 1992), Ch. 14, p. 197.
- ³⁴ Da Vinci, "Parte Prima," Ch. 31, p. 251.
- ³⁵ It would seem clear that Leonardo would not have approved of the more keenly radical work of Jan van Eyck, whose extension of the laws of perspective beyond simple representation, and towards radical omniscience, appear to gesture towards later Idealist philosophy. Van Eyck's approach, ground by the "two infinities" of the infinitesimally small, and the infinitely large, simultaneously presented within the single work, was achieved through a compositional technique which comprised of a seemingly infinite multiplicity of details (cf. Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting*, p. 181). In this way, Van Eyck presented the vision of the artist as that which appeared to genuinely rival the perspective of the Divine.
- ³⁶ Da Vinci, "Parte Prima," Ch. 7, p. 192.
- ³⁷ Notably, the conception of vision as the "most noble" sense is characteristic of Augustinian attitudes towards vision (Farago, *Leonardo da Vinci's Paragone*, p. 292).
- ³⁸ Farago, *Leonardo da Vinci's Paragone*, p. 301.
- ³⁹ Da Vinci, "Parte Prima," Ch. 7, p. 187.
- ⁴⁰ Da Vinci, "Parte Prima," Ch. 15, p. 201 and Ch. 32, p. 249.
- ⁴¹ Chastel, "Introduction," p. xvi. See also John White, *The Birth and Rebirth of Pictorial Space* (London and Boston: Faber & Faber, 1987), p. 213.
- ⁴² Chastel argues that Alberti held similar views, although there is no supporting evidence for this within *On Painting* (Chastel, "Introduction," p. xvi).
- ⁴³ Chastel, "Introduction," p. xvi.
- ⁴⁴ Da Vinci, "Parte Prima," Ch. 14, pp. 197-9.
- ⁴⁵ Da Vinci, "Parte Prima," Ch. 3, p. 181.
- ⁴⁶ Da Vinci, "Parte Prima," Ch. 6, p. 185.
- ⁴⁷ Da Vinci, "Parte Prima," Ch. 5, p. 181.
- ⁴⁸ Giovanni Maiorino, *Leonardo da Vinci: The Daedalian Mythmaker* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State UP, 1992), p. 144.
- ⁴⁹ Subject, however, to the instabilities of memory.
- ⁵⁰ Da Vinci, "Parte Prima," Ch. 14, p. 197.
- ⁵¹ Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, p. 3.