

Ideal Cities

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Reflections on the subject of antiquity and the future

In the history of art, we find many recurrences of antiquity, since it is a source of instruction and a model for subsequent aesthetic developments. In his studies of Neoclassical and Romantic aesthetics and poetics, Rosario Assunto¹ illustrates that antiquity itself can be experienced as the future. It can be said that memory underpins all innovation and gives authenticity to new and, at times, shocking forms. Antiquity is present in artworks in the play of fantastic forms we find in masterpieces. This presence entails the reinterpretation of images from the Classicism of the Romans to that of the age of Charlemagne, from Humanism to the Enlightenment, from the Renaissance of the modern era to the Renaissance of the postmodern era. Even the Greeks reinvented their past in an “archeology of nostalgia”, to use John Boardman’s² expression. Greek antiquity features myth, history, imagination, and personifications in an amalgam of meanings and symbols. Classicism is synonymous with values considered to be universal: perfection, proportion, equilibrium, harmony, grace, and intensity and naturalness of figures. In this sense, we can speak of a future dimension of Classicism, according to Salvatore Settis, who studies the phases of the Western artistic tradition. He argues that the more we see the “classical” not as a dead culture we inherited and for which we can take no credit but as something surprising to be recreated each day and as a powerful stimulus to understand the “other”, the more we will be able to mould future generations³.

In order to appreciate this perspective, we need to reflect on the imagination and the relationship between art and nature, providing appropriate examples. Antiquity as the future is to be studied in the light of the process in which reality is expressed as form and form expresses reality. In this regard, it is useful to take into account the viewpoints of two different but important authors. The first is that of George Simmel who, in the early part of the twentieth century, stated that the relative heights attained by technical progress had become an *absolute* value in the sense that the splendor of technology and money were smothering “spirituality” and “meditation”, qualities that managed, nonetheless, to achieve a sort of vindication by generating a sense of tension and nostalgia⁴. The second is that of Roland Barthes who described the endless resignification of the object observed and in so doing affirmed the overflow of the senses relative to first impressions⁵. The real is thus enriched by the artificial. We could also say, as does Hans

Blumenberg with his concept of “metaphorology”, that art produces an illusion but it is never simply fantasy. It is the elaboration of elementary or foundational models of thought: the creative process is essentially mythic⁶.

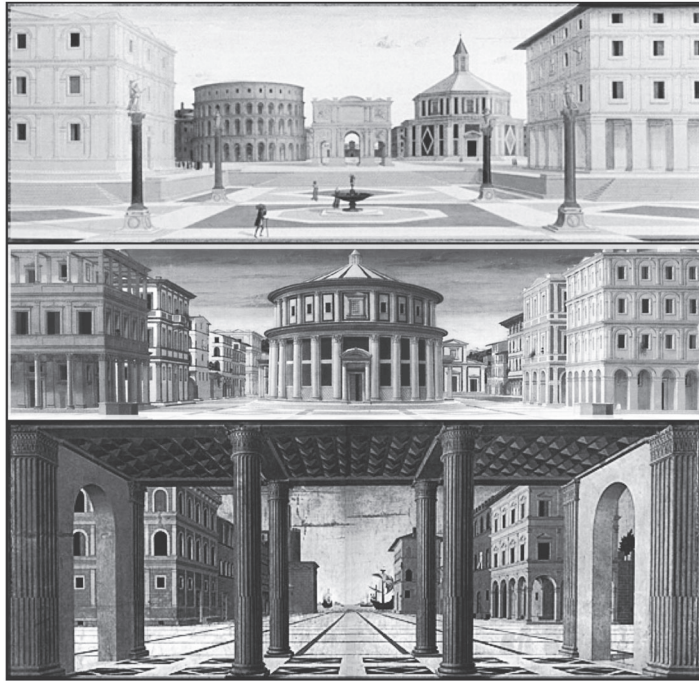
To be more specific, we need to reflect on the imagination and nature. If we think of the imagination as dreaming, we are sometimes able to gain access to the hidden order of a universal language that nature itself creates and projects all around us: a language, we might say, of both nature and art, that is, of being and doing (of the poietic display of things and events) because nature pertains to art, the expression of living forms, as art pertains to nature, the expression of existent things. It is a language whose properties are multiplicity and mutability; it is a language infused with myths and symbols, facts and metaphors, truth and appearance or fantasy. It is the ecstatic vision that humans experience as part of nature and the illusion of a dream world. Signs, symbols, and representations surround us and seem to interact with us. But in what way do they do so? Is observing nature through an ecstatic gaze that is the manifestation of the oneiric world an illusion that our minds need, or is the act of observing nature connected to a real expression of things? Can the subjective element disappear when we lose ourselves in thought?

To answer these questions we need to consider the fact that dreams are an activity that eludes time and space; they are an escape from the world in which we live. In this state, we experience a richness of figures, forms, and metaphors: images that flow like a musical score. We can say that we are pleasantly enmeshed in an ecstatic perception.

Now, in such a discussion on representation within the tradition and urban design of the age of Humanism and the Renaissance, we can introduce the topic of ideal cities. We are no longer speaking of the model of perfection epitomized by Athens and Rome in the course of human civilization. We move away from the biblical precedents of the Tower of Babel or the New Jerusalem. As well, while acknowledging its importance, we also move away from the example of Aquileia. Underlying these structures are the theories of Plato, Augustine of Hippo, and Campanella, but here I am essentially interested, on the one hand, in specific symbolic representations (found in the museums of Baltimore, works attributed Luca Signorelli among others, Urbino, works attributed to Luciano Laurana, and Berlin, works attributed to Paolo Uccello among others), which are related to the concept of harmony, and, on the other hand, in spatial projects inspired by the above representations, or to which category they ideally belong, for example, Sforzinda, Palmanova, Pienza, and Sabbioneta. This topic is of interest because we need to understand the meaning of the ideal in the unfolding of history and civilization. To be more precise, the ideal belongs or is proper to the Idea, understood as an essentially mental and spiritual entity as opposed to external reality; therefore, in general it has no existence apart from the mind. We could also say that the rational element within primary forms is the foundation of the real and of experience. The lessons present in this type of representation are rooted in Platonism whose special concept invests form with the harmony of sky and earth, and takes us beyond *mimesis*, the

artist's ability to imitate, beyond unreflective reproduction of nature, the realistic mirroring of the object, or the techniques of optional illusion, with the aim of shedding light on the living representation of the universal. An interpreter of the Idea as internal design of the real in Renaissance art is Erwin Panofsky, who famously deals with this subject in his essay of 1924. In the Italian courts of the second half of the fifteenth century, especially in the Florence of the Medici, the Milan of the Sforza, the Urbino of Federico da Montefeltro, and the Mantua of the Gonzaga, Beauty had become a privileged topic for accessing the world of the Ideas due to its capacity to mediate between the sensible world (as the only visible Idea) and the intelligible world (as image of the Idea of the Good, to which all things tend). This is a trajectory celebrated in the treatises and the works of the artists of that period. In spite of its original, strictly metaphysical meaning, the Idea of the Good was destined to become the cornerstone of all art theory. This came about as a consequence of the Plotinian development of the meaning of art, which Humanism managed to free from its original context, where it appeared to be decidedly diminished. The ideal city, therefore, pertains to the celebration of Renaissance Beauty via the theories of Brunelleschi and Alberti, theories that were developed by Filarete, Francesco di Giorgio Martini, and Leonardo who amalgamate contemplation and planning in a scientific-perspectival, geometric-mathematical vision, without we, the readers, forgetting the echo of utopian thought. At the same time, we discover a certain specularity between the representation of city and the representation of the society it embodies: geometry, perspective, and mathematical order combine with the new needs of military art and serve as the foundation of architecture. Matter, form, and spirit come together to create an integrated image of the world involving an eagerness to do and plan in accordance with the canons of Vitruvius. It is, at the same time, an idealization of space, which we can see in a variety of Renaissance paintings, where the interior and the exterior coexist, as in Piero della Francesca's *Flagellation of Christ* (1445), Leonardo's *Preparatory study for the background of the Adoration of the Magi* (1481), or Raphael's *The Marriage of the Virgin* (1504).

The painted images of ideal cities, together with the images of Sforzinda, Palmanova, Pienza, and Sabbioneta, demonstrate the power of the designing gaze and serve as a perennial source of instruction for historians of art and civilization, extending from antiquity to the future.



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<http://venividivici.us/sites/default/files/La-Citta-Ideale.jpg>



Palmanova, Italy

<http://www.arte-argomenti.org/saggi/aerea.jpg>