



“Art for Art's Sake” vs. Italian Art, Craft and Engineering: Brunelleschi, Nervi and Gomorra’s Dressmaker

Tom Verso (June 29, 2009)



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“Art for Art’s Sake”

In the latter part of the 19th century, a philosophy of aesthetics known as “art for art’s sake” became prominent in Euro-American culture. This philosophy argues that “true art” should be divorced from moral and/or utilitarian functions. Art should not serve the needs of religions or states, it must be “released from the tyranny of meaning and purpose.” Further, art should be divorced from craftsmanship.

For example, Oscar Wilde, a very prominent advocate of this philosophy, writes in an 1891 essay “The Soul of Man Under Socialism”:

“The beauty of a work of art has nothing to do with the fact that other people want what they want. The moment that an artist takes notice of what other people want, and tries to supply the demand, he ceases to be an artist, and becomes a dull or an amusing craftsman...a tradesman. He has no further claim to be considered as an artist.”

This philosophy is predicated on the ‘bohemian’ concept of an artist working isolated and alone in his studio alienated and separated from bourgeois values. The artist is in a quest for some absolute ‘beauty’ that s/he alone is the judge; and, ‘beauty’ is independent of craft, purposeful utility and meaning.

The evolution of the idea that art should be devoid of meaning and purpose, and disconnected from craft was taken to the extreme in the post-WW II art movement “Abstract Expressionism.” This art movement is characterized by the complete lack of meaning and more importantly, à la Wilde, the complete absence of craftsmanship. The work of these artists is characterized by accident and chance. A quintessential example is Jackson Pollack’s “Drip Painting” technique.

However, the concept of “art of art’s sake” was not limited to schools of art such as Abstract Expressionism that explicitly embraced, articulated and promoted the concept. The concept generally permeated the art culture and was tacit in other, not so obvious, “art of art’s sake” fields such as architecture. For example, the renowned 20th century Italian architect/engineer Pier Luigi Nervi observed:

“In the best architectural magazines...it is not rare to see projects that would be impossible to build described and analyzed aesthetically. Of what value is an architectural idea that cannot become a reality?” Nervi challenges the notion that art is independent of craft and utility.

The bohemian notion that art is or should be independent of moral and/or utilitarian functions, is divorced from craftsmanship, and has nothing to do with what other people want differentiates “art for art’s sake’ aesthetics from the history of European art generally and Italian art most particularly.



“Art for art’s sake” – So Not Italian!

All the great art of Italy down to the present day has utilitarian functions, is the product of brilliant craftsmanship, engineering and, most importantly, Italian art is always created for other people. The Italian artist is anything but an isolated bohemian in a quest for personal beauty. S/he is the quintessential bourgeois businessperson competing with other artist for the opportunity to create things for customers for a profit.

Without master craftsmanship there would be no Italian art. Brunelleschi and Donatello were master goldsmiths. Michelangelo was apprenticed to the painter Domenico Ghirlandaio. Virtually all the great Italian artist started as craft apprentices/students. They mastered their crafts before they created their art and they sold their art to the highest bidder. Similarly, today architects like Nervi and fashion designer like Giorgio Armani combine master craftpersonship with creative ideas to profitably produce utilitarian works of magnificent art.

Brunelleschi’s Dome

Of the many phenomenal artistic accomplishments of the 15th century Italian artist Filippo Brunelleschi, none was greater than the Duomo of Florence, an amazingly magnificent beautiful structure that draws millions of visitors a year from all over the globe. While the tourist and art historians’ marvel at its aesthetic beauty, few appreciate that the Duomo is the result of the incredible **engineering** mind of Brunelleschi and phenomenal craftsmanship of the masons who executed his design.

Five hundred years before engineers would use the mathematical equations of Newtonian physics to analyze and predict the stability of large structures, Brunelleschi used intuition and imagination to determine the structural components and construction techniques needed to build the cathedral dome of Santa Maria del Fiore. There are more than four million bricks in the Duomo. They were laid a herringbone pattern without centering or formwork to guide the curvilinear shape of the dome. A bricklayer by trade – trust me – this is truly amazing brickwork. Of course, the Duomo has utilitarian function and served the needs of both the state and religion. Brunelleschi competed passionately for the contract to build the dome and the profit he would make from it.

Engineering, craft, utility and profitability all came together to make the idea of the Duomo a reality. Absent any of those components and it would not (indeed, could not) have been built. The absence of any, and the Duomo would have remained a picture on piece of paper – ‘art for art’s sake!’



Pier Luigi Nervi

In the twentieth century, a modern day Brunelleschi, architect/engineer Pier Luigi Nervi elevated the building crafts to art. Biographer Ada Louise Huxtable eloquently summarized his work:

“Today, the quality of Nervi’s work stands alone, in the truly great tradition of Italian design. Nor is it odd that this tradition, based largely on an elegant array of magnificent palaces and churches, should turn to factories, hangars, warehouses and exposition halls. It is in these buildings that we find the current frontiers of design, and the most significant structural and esthetic advances of our age.

The master of large-scale concrete vaulting in the twentieth century, Pier Luigi Nervi, made a technical examination of Santa Maria del Fiore in the 1930’s before developing the techniques he used in structures such as the Vatican audience hall and the Palazzo dello Sport in Rome.

The importance of building ‘craft’ in bringing art to fruition was noted by Nervi. He said:

“A designer must know how skillful are the contracting firms who will execute the design. Many times I refuse to accept commissions for the design of large structures in countries ...I was not familiar in order to avoid running the risk of designing shapes and structures which might prove impossible to build.”

In short, no craft - no building - no art.

Like his progenitors, Nervi designed and built buildings that met the utilitarian needs of his customers, were profitable for his construction company and were aesthetically acclaimed.

Gormorra’s Dressmaker

The plot of the movie Gormorra was a pathetic cliché about inherently bad people doing bad things to inherently good people - like the old black-hat white-hat cowboy movies- completely devoid of the complex sociological and political economic causes of crime. Thus, dressmakers are exploited by the System-Camorra; not by the System-International Capitalism, not by the Chinese merchants who profitably sold their cloth to the Italians, and not the dress merchants who profitably sell the dresses to Hollywood movie stars. Essentially the film is nothing more than a classic “shoot’em-up” “bang-bang” car chase movie that the film industry churns out by the scores each year - albeit with



pretensions to being high moral literature. But, I digress.

Again, because the plot was a cliché, I found myself focusing more on the cinematic spectacles and nuances of the characters than the story line. The filmmaker went to great lengths to depict Italians as unsanitary people living in unsanitary apartment buildings. Does organized crime make people unsanitary? In the heyday of the American Mafia, ‘Little Italy’ was not a dirty place. Nevertheless, no matter how negative filmmakers try to depict Italians, the inherent magnificence of Italian culture always defeats their pejoratives.

For example, the architecture of the unsanitary apartment buildings was intriguing. They were high-density apartment buildings, but they were designed in such a way that each apartment opens to a mall like ‘open-air’ ‘natural-light’ walkway giving each apartment a personal quality. The pyramid style on one side of the buildings contributed to an aesthetic quality, and made possible a public open area for the resident’s children to have a play area without having to go down and out onto the streets. In short, an Italian designed apartment building combined utility and aesthetics, and is nothing like the prison architecture high-rise apartment buildings one so often sees in American cities.

But, it is the character of the master dressmaker Pasquale that one sees those qualities that has made Italy synonymous with great art. He is depicted as being exploited by the Cammora. But, ignoring the moralizing and concentrating on Pasquale’s work behavior, once again you see the unity of Italian craft, utility, productivity and art. Pasquale is a designer, craftsman and shop manager. He is given the near impossible task of meeting a quantitative and qualitative production deadline. Like Brunelleschi and Nervi he has to design the product and manage the production profitably. He designs the dresses and manages the workers making the dresses. A master craftsman, he picks up a dress being made by a seamstress and examines the minutia of the seams – he demands perfection in each small detail. A master manager, he keeps all his workers on track and on time. A master designer, his dresses receive international acclaim. Again, design, craft, utility, and profitability are the necessary conditions of his art – of Italian art.

In sum:

Existential Psychologist R.D Lang posited: “All identities require an Other: some other with whom self-identity is actualized.” And, University of Naples Professor Gabriella Gribaudo writes: “An identity is the product of a comparison.” Similarly, the identity, nature, essence of Italian art can be better understood when juxtaposed and compared with its ‘Other’ – “Art for art’s sake.”

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