

Brady, Beau

Exploring the Image of Drapery in Works of Art

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Dating from classical sculpture to the late nineteenth century, the image of drapery was an essential expressive tool for the artist. Artists recognized the immense expressive visual power of draped cloth. At times, the artist would fill up two thirds of the canvas with various drapes arranged specifically to create the desired expression. The twentieth century brought a new art and a disassociation with the traditional style, including the uses of drapery. Draped cloth, amidst its great significance on all art forms for hundreds of years, all but disappeared in high art during the twentieth century.

Therefore, I shall discuss the uses of drapery from classical sculpture to the late nineteenth century. Classical art was the beginning of the draped figure. The classical drape remained the prominent style of clothing the figure in art. Most artists believed that contemporary clothing was not to be used because of the foolishness of fashions. Leonardo Da'vinci said, "Costumes of our own period should not be depicted...so that we may be spared being laughed at by our successors for the mad fashions of men and leave behind only things that may be admired for their dignity and beauty." The classic drape presented a simplicity and elegance, which allowed for the manipulation of expressions.

During this span of time, many periods of stylistic changes occurred. Though the fashion of drapery generally remained the same, the styles of representing drapery differed greatly. For example, medieval art presented drapery in a flat curvilinear style with rich emerald-like colors. The early renaissance brought about a search for form and structure of the draped figure. The modeling of the cloth and search for depth was becoming more important, while the colors were slightly muted and varied. Flemish art represented classical drapery in yet a different manner. The drapery became very heavy and voluminous. In some cases, the drapery seemed rigid and sculpted. The Italian renaissance developed a more natural and flowing style of drapery. They recognized that it was the figure that gave an impetus to the drapery, and would often exaggerate this connection to create greater emotion or excitement in the work. The differences in representing drapery amidst the different time periods and geographic locations go on. However, they all have at least one commonality in that they recognized and utilized the expressive capabilities of drapery in their art.

Amidst the varied styles and methods of representing drapery, these artists were able to create vast quantities of expressions in their works. Yet, the role of drapery always remained secondary to the figure. Those who used drapery well did it in a way that allowed the drapery to magnify all of its expressive qualities, while still directing the viewer to the main subject—that being the figure in the work. The drapery was to create situations, emotions, attitudes, and status in a way that it was felt and not noticed. Drapery became valuable tool for the artist to magnify the figure.

This connection between drapery and its subordinate role to the figure became clearer to me as I began to create my own works of art. Within these works, I appropriated drapery from traditional works and isolated them in new settings as the main subjects. As a result of this isolation, the

absence of the figure draws great attention, and that negative space becomes almost as important as the representation of the drapery. Surprisingly, this process created a contest of dominance. The drapery, maintaining all of its expressive abilities, continues to direct the viewer to what once was the subject. However, the absence of the figure—and the fact that the drapery is the only subject rendered—causes the viewer to reflect back to the drapery; thereby, preventing the drapery from going unnoticed. This reaction of the viewer creates reciprocity of subject dominance.

This reciprocity of subject dominance happens because of the inherent affiliation that cloth has to people in the role of clothing, to objects as coverings, or to the interior of homes as decor or curtains. Drapery has always been subordinate to something else. This would seemingly prevent drapery from ever becoming the dominant subject. However, this relationship is what makes it possible for drapery to be recognized for its significant role and expressive qualities in art. When the figures and surrounding settings are removed and the drapery is isolated, the reciprocity of subject dominance begins. The viewer first sees the drapery in a formal way. Their eyes are then, subconsciously, directed to the negative space where the original subject once was. Recognizing that there may have been a figure or object that once gave form to the drapery, they reflect back to the drapery in recognition that the drapery has now given form to the figure or object. The figure has thereby given dominance to the drapery, just as drapery has traditionally given dominance to the figure. It is a reciprocity of subject dominance.

As the dominant subject, the formal qualities of drapery were also made apparent. The creases, folds, shapes, and overall form that drapery takes, when focused in on, may become ambiguous and abstract, even when rendered in a very tight manner. This creates an interesting conceptual twist between traditional art and modern art. Traditional art embraced the illusion and representation of things real. Modern art rejected traditional art and strove for abstraction. The dichotomizing ability of cloth to be both highly represented and yet appears to be an abstracted form speaks of its veritable ness as a subject in art.

The exhibition of paintings and prints I did for this project represents a revival in the image of drapery. In a way, this is a tribute to the significant, yet often unrecognized role the image of drapery has had in fine art.