

4.2 Anatomy of a masterpiece: the use of symmetry in Renaissance paintings

Objectives

Through the analysis of a painting by Giorgione, *Madonna di Castelfranco* (fig. 4.2a and b), in this exercise, you will learn how to:

- Recognize different types of symmetry in an image, e.g., central, bilateral, radial, rotational.
- Identify different ways symmetry can be expressed, e.g., through shapes, colours, and lines.
- Appreciate how symmetry can provide stability and unity to an image.
- Highlight how symmetry is violated to insert tension into the image, inserting elements of diversity (shapes, colours, lines).



Figure 4.2.a: *Madonna di Castelfranco*, Giorgione (1504 ca.)

Background

Giorgione's *Madonna di Castelfranco* is located in a chapel with no windows above the altar. It is about one metre wide, 2 metres high. At the altar's base, a tombstone is decorated with a relief portraying a young man lying with his hands clasped and dressed with armour.

Giorgione painted the *Madonna* around 1500. The painting was a commission from a Venetian nobleman for the death of his son during a military campaign. This explains the young man's grave at the foot of the altar.

The picture shines in the twilight with its golden light. The lower part of the painting is positioned at the eye's height, and the rest almost looms on the observer, so much so that to look at the whole painting, an observer has to recline her head backward slightly.

It is not easy to observe a painting. It is necessary to let our eyes wander on the painting while carefully scrutinizing our immediate and fleeting sensations and letting our eyes slide quietly over its surface.

The checkered floor of the painting seems to fall over the observer. Why? The floor is at eye height. We expect the vanishing point to be at the height of our eye, more or less in correspondence with the coat of arms at the throne's base. Instead, we realize that it is located much higher in the eyes of Mary (fig. 4.2b, centre).

The painting is divided into two parts: the theatrical scene at its bottom, in which the two saints invite the deceased to enter the painting, and the landscape in the upper part, a typical Italian landscape, with the countryside in the foreground and blue mountains in the background. The landscape represents the world the dead man belonged to, which he left with death.

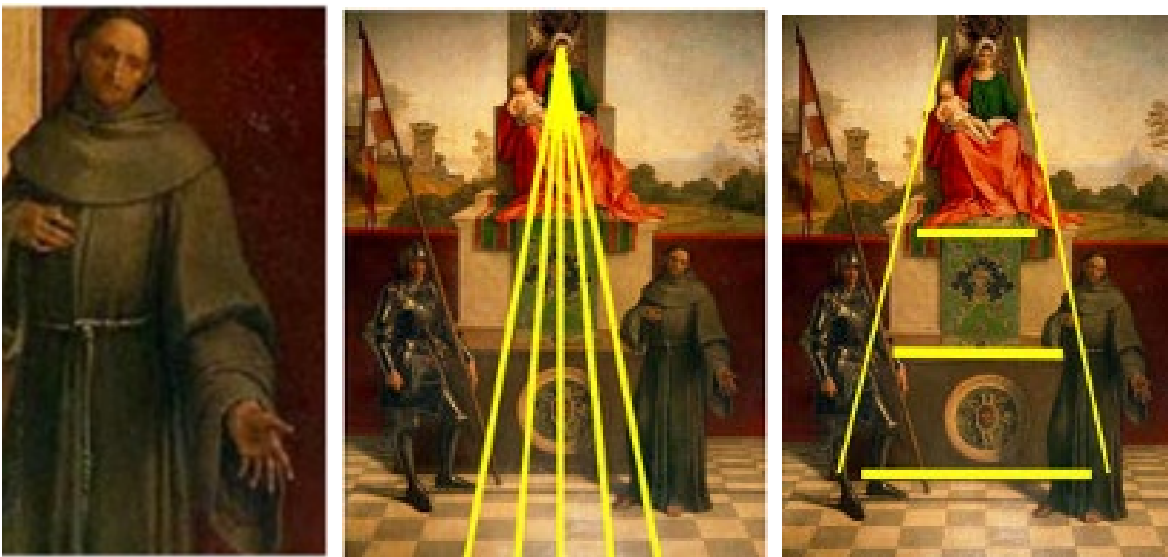


Figure 4.2.b: Analysis of the symmetry

The painting has a robust central symmetry, achieved in three different ways: the pyramid created through the perspective (fig. 4.2b, centre and right), the degrading pedestals on which rests the throne of the Virgin, the two saints placed on the sides. This central symmetry gives the image an aura of stability and certainty. The painter is leveraging symmetry to affirm the certainty of the salvation of the deceased, with the Virgin reassuring us from above that this promise will be kept.

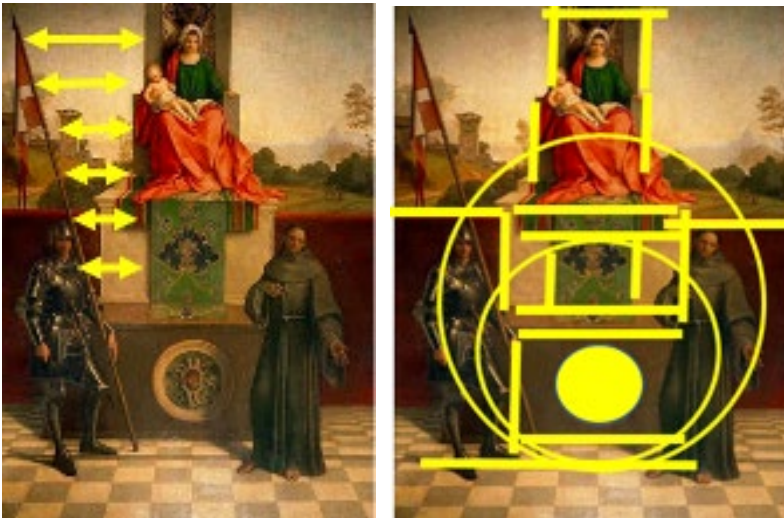


Figure 4.2c: The violation of the symmetry

However, symmetry must be violated to express visual energy and dynamism. Giorgione creates the rupture through the saint's spear on the left (fig. 4.2c, left side): the tilted spear breaks the symmetry of the painting and creates a tension with the central structure, which puts the whole image in motion.

A second way Giorgione breaks the central symmetry is via the colour. The Madonna with the child is brilliant red. It is the only bright colour in the painting, an acute chromatic note emerging from the earthy colours in the rest of the painting. The Virgin and the child, with their bright colours, belong to another universe, the world of eternity. To observe the face of the Madonna, we must slightly recline the head, and this imperceptible movement accentuates the feeling of height and distance. The Madonna is small and distant but not evanescent, and she is a substantial presence.

All the pieces start to fit together. Observe the saints inviting the deceased, and the observer as well, to enter the painting. They almost slip out of the picture on to the sloping floor and appear next to us. They make us cross the invisible thin layer that separates the image from the observer's world. They are positioned on each side of the staircase, almost like the two sides of an opening door. We climb the stairs with our eyes. As we climb, abandoning the earthly experience, we cast one last melancholic glance at the mundane world, here represented by the castle, the countryside, the mountains, an almost dreamy landscape softened by the golden colours of memory. Above the staircase lies the new life, whose vivid colours now seem enigmatic and unbearable. We do not understand it, but the charming and benevolent face of the lady reassures us.

Instructions

Analyze the painting below (Raphael, The Marriage of the Virgin) and answer the following questions:

1. What types of symmetries can you identify in the image?
2. Identify ways through which symmetry confers stability and structural unity to the image (hint: highlight graphic elements such as shapes and lines, as in the example).
3. Identify examples of symmetry violation.



Figure 4.2d: The Marriage of the Virgin, Raphael (1504)