

5.2 Anatomy of a masterpiece: painting complexity

Objectives

This exercise illustrates the importance of grouping in order to reduce the observer's cognitive overload. Through the analysis of famous paintings, the exercise shows how grouping in images performs the same narrative function as using episodes in a story.

Background

In his fresco *The Preaching of the Antichrist*, Luca Signorelli adopts grouping to represent the chaos generated by heretic preachers inspired by the devil and opposing the orthodoxy of the official Church (fig. 5.2a).

The Antichrist, falsely resembling Christ, preaches to the crowd from a pedestal while being inspired by a demon whispering heresy in his ears. The false Christ is surrounded by many people, clustered in various groups. On the left side, a man is executing a brutal massacre, while a woman receives money from a merchant for her services as a prostitute.

In the background, in front of the temple, the Antichrist orders death executions, while in the central area he is performing a miracle to disguise his true identity. Further down, to the right, a small group of religious are gathered in prayer after consulting the scriptures and discovering the deception. Finally, in the upper left, the Archangel Michael stabs the Antichrist with his sword, causing him to fall upside down, while inflicting mortal rays to his followers.



Figure 5.2a: The Preaching of the Antichrist, Luca Signorelli (1499-1503)

The painting does not have a clear centre and lacks symmetry. The artist takes the chance of representing the story through a complex assembly of more than a hundred characters. The absence of a clear visual centre and symmetry generates anxiety in the observers, who feel lost in the confusion and the commotion. Signorelli deliberately exploits this lack of structure so that observers can experience the anxiety of living in a world in which false preaching spreads and dominates.

However, Signorelli helps viewers contain and console these feelings by organizing the large painting in about ten scenes connected in a narrative sequence (fig. 5.2b). This organization is similar to the one adopted in modern comic strips: many small cartoons, each of which describes an episode of the story. Notice how a group is distinguished from the other, and how, within each group, Signorelli balances uniformity and variety (fig. 5.2b top). The groups rotate around an empty centre that gives the observers some visual relief while helping viewers connect the various scenes in an imaginary oval figure (fig. 5.2b down).

The circle is dynamically generated by two connected movements: the raised arm of the Antichrist and the arm of a monk who is behind him. Each of the two movements points to the consequences of false preaching: crime and perversion in the bottom part of the painting and false

miracles in the opposite scene at the top. The circle finds its final figurative and narrative closure in the divine punishment of the Antichrist and his followers.

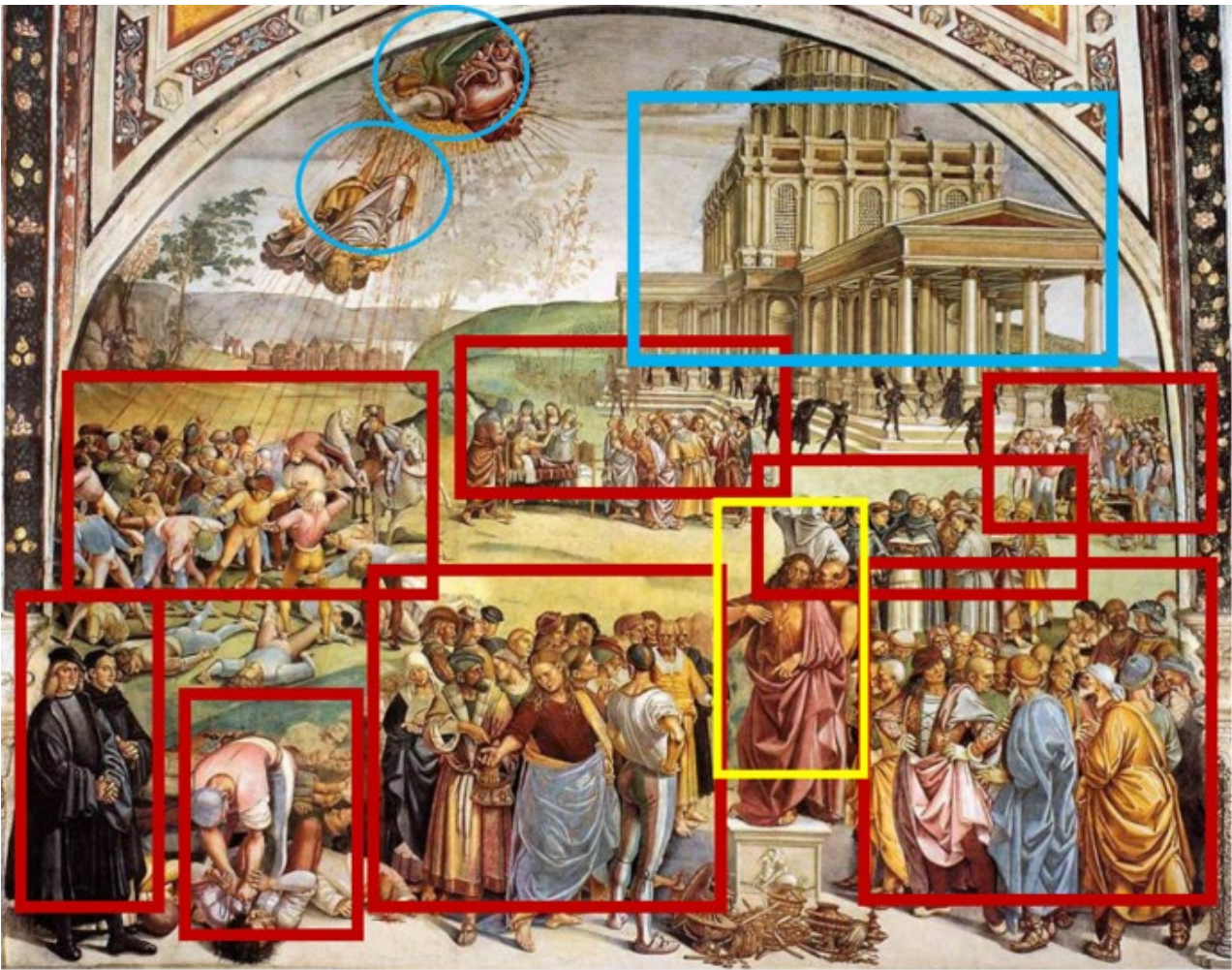




Figure 5.2b - Groups and narrative closure in Luca Signorelli's Fresco

Instructions

Piero Della Francesca and Giotto created the two frescoes below, respectively about 1452 and in 1306. Both artists used the grouping strategy to illustrate a story and give it a structural solemnity.

After carefully observing the two images, answer the following questions:

1. How many groups and subgroups can you recognize?
2. How did the artists give unity to each group (colours, shapes, rhythms, symmetries, etc.)
3. How is the unit of the group balanced with an internal variety?
4. Observe the relationships between the groups understand how their arrangement contributes to the realization of a narrative unity through the story that the artist intended to tell us.

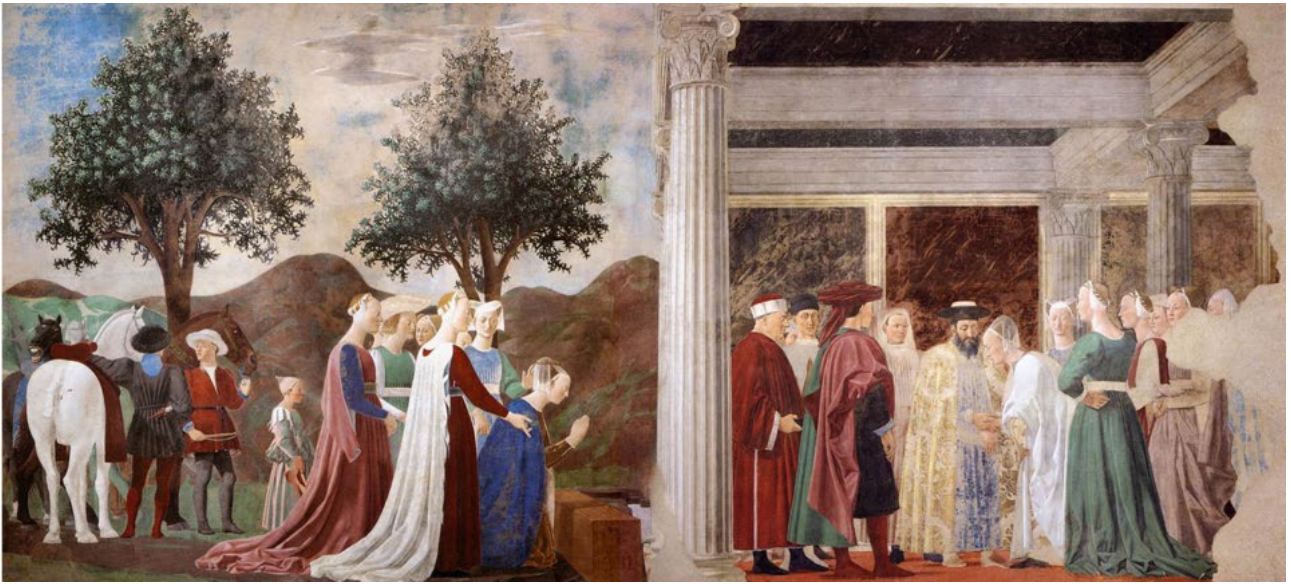


Figure 5.2c - Adoration of the Holy Wood and the Meeting of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, Piero della Francesca (1452 ca.)



Figure 5.2d - Last Judgement, Giotto (1306)