Walter Pater's The Renaissance

Walter Horatio Pater

"What is important, then, is not that the critic should possess a correct abstract definition of beauty for the intellect, but a certain kind of temperament, the power of being deeply moved by the presence of beautiful objects." - Walter Horatio Pater

Walter Pater's The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry

The Renaissance is a series of essays by Walter Pater written between 1867 and 1877 and was published as a collection in multiple editions. In each essay Pater critiques a specific renaissance artist or poet and emphasizes the importance of embracing the beauty and experience of art rather than judging a work of art by its accuracy or the moral standing of the artist.

The essays are able to stand on their own, and they are unified by the encasement of the Preface and Conclusion which cause each essay to focus on Pater’s modern and controversial philosophy on art critique. Individual essays exemplify Pater’s depth of analysis and passion for art and its history, but The Renaissance as a whole exemplifies Pater’s desire for all art critics to recognize the significance of beauty in all art forms and in all life experiences.

Preface and Conclusion to The Renaissance

The Preface and Conclusion in Pater’s The Renaissance serve to frame not only the methods and philosophy which he uses while discussing art in the volume, but also to declare the existence of a new movement which serves to exemplify this philosophy. The preface shows the example of the “student of Aesthetics” who asks himself a number of questions when viewing a piece of art, or any other experience, all of which focus on the emotional impact that work or experience makes upon him.

Furthermore, Pater implies that the value of a piece of art should be largely measured by the scale and consistency of this moving experience, using the poetry of Wordsworth as an example where “Genius... has crystallized a part, but only a part.” This receptionist approach to viewing art comes as a stark contrast to the interpreted style favored by John Ruskin and other early art critics.

It is, however, the conclusion to The Renaissance which makes the boldest claims and which forever colored Pater’s reputation. Here Pater expands the advice and methods which he outlines in the Preface to become a philosophy of life. He implores us as readers to seek out and find those experiences which move move us, claiming “To maintain this ecstasy is success in life.” These views were far removed from the typical Victorian mindset of reserved formality and repressed pleasure. The Aesthetic movement, being a response to this classification and qualification of enjoyment, is given a battle cry “To be for ever curiously testing new opinions and courting new impressions, never acquiescing in a facile orthodoxy... The theory or system which requires of us the sacrifice of any part of this experience... has no real claim upon us.” This cry went out to many artists and authors still celebrated today such as Henry James, Oscar Wilde, and Vernon Lee who took Pater’s advice to heart. While the works of Pater were never as well received generally after the publication of The Renaissance, his legacy of desiring art to be made for the sake of art was continued by those mentioned above and others, and spawned a conversation about the subjective versus objective nature of art which continues today.

Leonardo da Vinci

Pater’s essay on Leonardo da Vinci was among his earliest writings, and one of his first published works as a young writer. In looking back toward the Renaissance as a framework for his somewhat radical philosophies, Pater was provided with a more neutral cultural backdrop than his own, conservative Victorian society. Pater himself speaks of the “enchanted region of the Renaissance” where “one need not be forever on one’s guard”. The subject of the Renaissance was free of the moral and religious implications Pater’s writing had on his own life and, especially in the case of Leonardo, pre-existing legend and biographical ambiguity allowed Pater to explore his own ideas in a context free from moral judgment.
Pater considers Leonardo to have been artistically driven by two main forces: “curiosity and the desire of beauty.” These further led to Leonardo’s mastery of the subject matter with which he was predominantly concerned, nature scenes and portraiture. Pater brings Leonardo forward in time, calling him “a part of the ‘modern spirit’” and observing in his style “something of the freer manner and richer humanity of a later age.” The scientific curiosity to which Pater attributes Leonardo’s interest in painting nature is something that Pater feels truly sets Leonardo apart from his contemporaries. He describes Leonardo’s style as a sort of proto-realism, appealing to experience rather than allegory.

Throughout his essay on Leonardo, Pater focuses as much on the artist’s life as on his works, the constant mystery surrounding both seeming to enhance rather than inhibit Pater’s analysis and opinions. Pater celebrates everything that set Leonardo apart from his contemporaries, romanticizing the idea of the “strange soul” who “anticipated modern ideas” and who feverishly jumped from one project to the next, temporarily abandoning painting to explore his interest in science only to then “crowd all his chief work into a few tormented years of later life.” As critics assert, subtle allusions to the long-standing question of the nature of Leonardo’s sexuality (the “express historical testimony” that, Pater says, prevents one from considering the Mona Lisa Leonardo’s “ideal lady”) and descriptions of male beauty pervade Pater’s analyses; however, these details are minimal and, ultimately, better serve to support Pater’s idea that beauty in art is universal and transcendental. By emphasizing the mystery of Leonardo’s life as well as that inherent in his paintings, Pater presents just one manifestation of the idea that subject matter and form should be synonymous; that is, in this case, Pater’s lyrical account of Leonardo’s life is as aesthetically pleasing as the art itself.

The Mona Lisa

Pater’s analysis of the Mona Lisa is the lengthiest he makes of a single painting in the Leonardo chapter, and remains one of the most well-known analyses of the Mona Lisa today. His writing style in this section, more than any other, is in itself “of such poetical power that many men committed the words to memory. It was not at all unusual for a man to recite Pater as he gazed at the painting itself.” It is fitting, in the context of his work and ideals, that Pater’s analysis of the painting he calls “in the truest sense, Leonardo’s masterpiece” would, in a way, become his own sort of literary chef d’oeuvre. Pater seems to consider the Mona Lisa an extension of Leonardo himself; shrouded in mystery yet universally known; deeply desired; at once ancient and “the symbol of the modern idea.” He ascribes to her a certain amount of accountability; “Hers is the head upon which all ‘the ends of the world are come,’ and the eyelids are a little weary.” There is no better way for Pater to represent intrinsically his assertion that “Leonardo’s history is the history of his art.” Just as Leonardo’s shoulders are among those upon which the Academic canon stands, his portrait of the mysterious Gioconda launched an artistic renaissance, the influences of which were still resounding at the time of Pater’s writing of The Renaissance.

Pater’s Prose as Artistic Form
It is important to consider, especially with regards to the Mona Lisa, that none of the nineteenth-century editions of *The Renaissance* included reproductions of the works Pater discussed. His essays were more about creating a language with which one could talk about art, and connecting visual description with his more abstract philosophies, than they were about the individual works themselves. There is a marked absence in Pater’s writing of discussion on formal artistic elements such as composition, line and color; he focuses instead on the larger concepts that pervade Leonardo’s life and work, and the personal, emotional basis for both their creation and their reception, in Leonardo’s time and in Pater’s.

Pater’s prose is virtually an art form in its own right, the opening of his Mona Lisa analysis having even been translated into verse by William Butler Yeats. Pater uses rhythm, alliteration, and metaphor to draw his readers in, rather than to the paintings themselves, to the mystery behind them. Thus setting up in a single image various antithetical oppositions that enhance, rather than compromise, his concept of Leonardo’s “strange beauty.” According to Pater’s descriptions, the Medusa of the Uffizi is “corrupt” yet “exquisite.” Her head is covered with “delicate snakes” in “terrified struggle.” The “rigid order” of Leonardo’s journals is directly contradicted to the “restlessness of his character.” Pater further sees in Leonardo a constant conflict between curiosity and the desire of beauty; a struggle between reason (ideas) and the senses (the desire of beauty).

There are a few recurring images that span the length of Pater’s Leonardo essay; music is perhaps the one that best relates to his ideas presented in the Giorgione essay and his Conclusion to *The Water*, however, is also an image that pervades the chapter, and seems to represent for Pater a sort of opposition to, or companion of, beauty and love in art. “Two ideas,” Pater says, were confirmed in Leonardo, relatively early in his career: “the smiling of women and the motion of great waters.” The water theme is addressed in relation to almost every painting Pater discusses in the essay, and, in the most notable passage, Pater traces the flow of moving water from painting to painting, “evoking a pervasive pattern of landscape background” until it comes to an end, pooling around the Mona Lisa, “the presence that rose…so strangely beside the waters.” There is a constant interplay between the fluid prose of Pater’s analysis of the Mona Lisa and the pervasive influence of the woman herself, and she seems in the end to overpower even the compelling movement and depth of his prose.

**Male Beauty in Pater’s Leonardo Essay**

Pater is generally known for his written effusions on male beauty, and, however subtle it is, his celebration of male (or at least androgynous) beauty is not absent from his discussion of Leonardo’s life and works. Pater’s first mention of androgynous (or universal) beauty is about a drawing of Leonardo’s, “a face of doubtful sex…with something voluptuous and full in the eyelids and the lips.” Though the figure cannot be immediately defined based on gender, it illustrates for Pater “better than anything else Leonardo’s type of womanly beauty.” Leonardo’s painting of John the Baptist also possesses qualities coded as female, such as his “delicate brown flesh and woman’s hair.” His “treacherous smile” connects him to the Mona Lisa herself, whose “unfathomable smile” holds, for Pater, “something sinister in it.” Taken by themselves, or even as a whole, these moments in Pater’s analysis serve to represent the idea that beauty in art should not be restrained to a specific gender, or even to a particular subject matter. There is no reason, based on the contents of the essay, to call into question Pater’s own sexuality; however, his view on the ambiguous nature of Leonardo’s is convoluted by his mention of the “one at Florence which Love chooses for its own;” the young man “beloved of Leonardo for his curled and waving hair.” Considering also the “express historical testimony” of which Pater speaks, the alleged evidence that Leonardo was sexually attracted to men, it is possible that Pater saw in Leonardo’s life a deeper basis for the androgynous beauty that pervaded his art, transcending boundaries of gender and religion.

**Pater, Religion, and the Leonardo essay**
Many of Pater’s more conservative contemporaries criticized his writing for advocating hedonism and a reversion to pagan sensibilities in lieu of the period’s indoctrinated Christian discipline and values. Indeed, in his Leonardo essay, Pater seems to promote the subversion of Christian ideologies, even in his discussion of the most overt Christian themes in Leonardo’s art. He talks about the gradual disappearance of the cross in the hand of John the Baptist as it was copied throughout the years, then relating the figure to Bacchus, a figure in “pagan” mythology. He discusses Christianity as the “new religion” in which “decayed gods…took employment” after the fall of paganism. He calls Leonardo “the most profane of painters,” constantly handling sacred subjects but in a way that carried them well beyond their intended, conventional use. Pater even chooses to interpret the Last Supper, rather than as Christ’s last blessing of his disciples, as “one taking leave of his friends.” Pater ends the Leonardo essay with the declaration that, though no one knows the exact form of Leonardo’s religion, he considers it of little importance in the grand scope of Leonardo’s genius. His blatant denunciation of the importance of Christianity in Leonardo’s life and work corresponds perfectly to his hedonistic claims in the Conclusion of *The Renaissance,* and serves to link the past with his present in an attempt to break with both.

School of Giorgione

In this essay Pater praises Giorgione for his individuality and creativity in a similar way to his essay on DaVinci. Pater says “Giorgione, who, though much has been taken by recent criticism from what was reputed to be his work, yet, more entirely than any other painter, sums up, in what we know of himself and his art, the spirit of the Venetian school.” He goes on to say “Giorgione detaches from the wall” in the way he paints his landscapes. Giorgione’s paintings came alive and caused their admirers to fully experience every detail of the scene, while most other painters simply painted to create an accurate-looking scene or portrait that simply became furniture in someone’s home. Pater says of Giorgione, “he is typical of that aspiration of all the arts toward music” which is a philosophy Pater fully immerses himself in.

Art and Music

Pater explains how music is the most complete form of art by the way it combines all other forms of art into a form that causes the listener to be experiencing the art completely with all of the senses. “In music, then, rather than in poetry, is to be found the true type or measure of perfected art.” He repeatedly notes how Giorgione has perfected the art of all art aspiring toward music and says “Giorgione is the initiator” of this kind of art. Although Giorgione’s art had been replicated and circulated throughout the sixteenth century and obscured his authenticity, Pater claims the criticisms had not “added anything important to the well-known outline of the life and personality of the man”.

It is clear that Walter Pater admired Giorgione’s life and works. “Giorgione is but an illustration of a valuable general caution we may abide by in all criticism.” Pater goes on throughout his essays in *The Renaissance* to encourage readers to appreciate art by experiencing it fully, not by trying to judge it by its relative aesthetics or accuracy.
Influence and the Aesthetic Movement

The ideas and principles described in the introduction and conclusion of *The Renaissance* codified a growing reaction to the romantic movement in art and literature. Described as the Aesthetic Movement in Britain and the Decadent movement in the rest of western Europe, followers of the movement embraced the concept contained in the quote heading this page and expanded on it, creating works which emphasized beauty over message for the sake of eliciting the most intense emotion possible. As such, social-political or moral messages were considered base distractions from pure sensation, and therefore unworthy of attention.

This philosophy ran counter to the utilitarian conception of art and literature propagated by earlier critics such as John Ruskin, who felt that a moral, religious, or historical lesson was integral to good art of any kind. Ironically, while followers of Pater and the Aesthetic Movement disagreed with the focus of Ruskin's criticism, the form of that criticism was both widely respected and influential to many of the movement's most prominent members such as Vernon Lee #4, as well as Pater himself.

Pater's influence on the Aesthetic was not limited to inspiration and founder, however. Through his series of Imaginary Portraits, published a decade after *The Renaissance*, Pater further explored the nature of beauty, emotion, and sensation. This exploration was carried to a further extreme by Oscar Wilde in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and served as a blueprint for future aesthetes and dandies such as Wilde, who spent the peak of his life trying to embody the ideal of beauty and art for the sake of their own enjoyment. Criticisms of the philosophy as practiced were common, often mocking the exaggerated affluence which was practiced by Wilde and many other notable aesthetes.

Such criticism did not deter both artists and authors from continuing to produce works catered to type of critic described in Pater's Conclusion. The constant pursuit of beauty and sensation at the exclusion of all else culminated in Oscar Wilde's famous quote from the preface to Dorian Gray "All art is quite useless," which implies that the purest essence of art requires the exclusion of any practical use or interpretation, leaving only beauty to be admired. This type of art would perfectly suit the intentions and desires of a critic following Pater's example, and is the defining goal of the Aesthetic movement.
Recent criticism of Pater and his works has tended to focus on the potential connection between “his status as a sexual outsider and his aesthetics.” Indeed, Pater’s career as a writer and art critic was situated on the verge of a new era in terms of the development of homosexuality as a public, recognizable social identity. Debatable evidence has, over the years, led to a general acceptance that Pater himself was homosexual. However, having died a year before Oscar Wilde’s notable imprisonment for his public assertion of his own identity, Pater opted to remain quietly chaste, narrowly missing out on the larger movement that would have allowed him to be more open, both in his writing and with his own sexual identity—whatever that may have been.

Pater bore a marginalized identity, asserting relatively revolutionary claims yet was still caught in the self-censorship of a more conservative society than Oscar Wilde’s, a generation later. His “Conclusion” proved too radical, especially considered independently of the rest of The Renaissance, for the majority of Victorian society. Yet, as a whole, he is never explicit enough in his writing to be definitively called the father of queer theory, a title occasionally bestowed upon him. His effusions on male beauty, so-called “positive indications of homosexual feeling” are just as often a celebration of universal or androgynous beauty, the transcendental effect of great art where the viewer is able to find beauty in form, the intended gender ultimately irrelevant.

Pater was writing at a time when being labeled “homosexual” would prove destructive to a man’s life and career. However, as a relatively new concept of identity, homosexuality was looked for everywhere, whether or not accusations were founded in real fact. It cannot be denied that certain moments in Pater’s writing may, for someone wanting to find them, hold potential indications of homosexual desire, or at least an uncommon preoccupation with it for the time. Pater’s choice of the Renaissance as a time in which to frame his developing philosophies where one “need not be forever on one’s guard,” where it wasn’t necessary to make judgments or take sides, seems to indicate most poignantly his intention in writing The Renaissance. He hoped to be able to write about elements of beauty in Renaissance art, and even to reference alleged evidence of Leonardo’s homosexuality, without the nature of his own sexuality being questioned. Similarly, despite modern opinion regarding the more secret aspects of Pater’s own life, and despite the ways in which Oscar Wilde and his other students found inspiration in Pater’s work, his writing is more than the manifestation of a man’s struggle with the constraints of a society unprepared to receive him; it is a testament to the potential of words, not only to describe art but, ultimately, to become it.
Debatable Points

What reason might Pater have had to focus on artists from the Italian Renaissance rather those from his own time?

Consider the fact that the most controversial essay in The Renaissance was written first. Artists such as Leonardo da Vinci were at least as widely respected in the mid 19th century as they are now. By connecting his philosophy with universally admired artists of old, Pater borrows from their credibility while avoiding offending more contemporary artists who might not agree with him.

In what way does Pater seem to be influenced by Giorgione?

Look specifically at the final paragraph of 'The School of Giorgione.' Pater backs his praises of Giorgione by identifying the need for critics such as himself to not let the critique or value setting get in the way of appreciating beauty.

In what ways do we see Pater's influence on his proteges?

Pater's aesthetic philosophy and passion for beauty are strung throughout Oscar Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray. For example, Chapter 11 displays Dorian Gray's infatuation with beauty in many forms and Dorian recognizes the way his experience of this beauty effects his senses and his soul.

How was Pater's philosophy on art critique viewed during his time?

Consider the order in which his essays were written. The conclusion of The Renaissance was highly criticized in its early appearance. Pater wrote most of the essays in The Renaissance after he wrote the Conclusion, seemingly as a way to back himself up.

Is Pater's philosophy relevant in today's society?

Although the 21st century provides a much more accepting atmosphere for ideas such as freedom of expression, the question of 'what is good art?' is still prominent.

In what ways, if any, did Walter Pater’s alleged homosexuality affect the acceptance of his philosophy in the 19th century? In what ways does it affect the reception of his philosophy today?

In the 19th century homosexuality was not widely considered an acceptable identification. Even today critics obsess over connecting Pater's philosophy to the possibility that he may have been gay. A better question to ask might be whether Pater’s philosophy becomes more or less powerful whether he was a homosexual or not.

References

1.) Pater, Walter “A Novel by Mr. Oscar Wilde” The Bookman Nov. 1891
2.) Oscar Wilde, review of Imaginary Portraits. The Pall Mall Gazette, June 11, 1887
4.) Lee, Vernon “Ruskinism” Belcaro: Being Essays on Sundry Aesthetic Questions, 1884
Walter Horatio Pater was born August 4, 1839 in Stepney, East End, London. Attending grammar school in London, at 14 he was sent to Kings School in Cambridge. Here he was influenced by both the spectacular cathedral there and his readings of John Ruskin to appreciate art and form as well as well-crafted prose and rhetoric. At the Queen’s College at Oxford Walter read a great deal outside the curriculum, including a number of German authors and philosophers. This breadth of study led to his being offered a fellowship after graduation to teach modern German philosophy.

While his later writings would gain him wide-raging respect, it was in Walter Pater’s early works that first gained him some notoriety. While essays such as ‘Coleridge’s Writings’ and ‘Leonardo da Vinci’ were well received, ‘Conclusion,’ closing his collection entitled The Renaissance, was extremely controversial. The view that finding the rare moments of joy and ecstasy should be the purpose of life was considered by many to be counter to Christianity by subjugating Heaven to these mortal experiences. While Pater was reserved and even apologetic regarding the reception of this short essay, the views he expressed in it remained with him and were expressed in later writings, regardless of continued criticism.
After a long hiatus following the harsh reception of The Renaissance, Pater published Marius the Epicurean, the hero of which became the model for the Aesthetes at the time. This was followed by a series of ‘Imaginary Portraits’, plotless descriptions of fictional individuals who exemplified specific emotions or ideas in an often historical setting. His ideas having found their place in the growing Aesthetic movement, Pater began to write more prolifically in his last years.

Pater continued to teach or tutor, primarily at Oxford, for the remainder of his life. Favored students such as Oscar Wilde would later become giants in the Aesthetic movement to which Pater was, perhaps unwittingly, an early founder. His friendship with Wilde was reciprocated and echoed professionally with each undertaking to write favorable reviews of works written by the other #1, #2.

Pater was an exceedingly private, sometimes called shy, person, however, leaving no diary and few letters of a personal nature. There has been some speculation regarding Pater’s potential homosexuality (he never married), mostly focused on his often close relationships with younger students. One incident in particular spawned many contemporary rumors regarding Pater’s sexuality, although the source of these rumors draws questions to their credibility. While close reading of his essays and fiction does reveal a high regard for homosocial ideology, little evidence exists to support any active homosexual interests during his life #3.

Walter Pater died suddenly July 30, 1894 at Oxford at the age of 55.

Resources and Links

The ‘Mona Lisa’ section read aloud (YouTube)
Walter Pater on the Victorian Web
Pater on Project Gutenberg (Free Download)
The Renaissance at Authorama
Giorgione on Wikipedia
Walter Pater on Facebook (seriously)
Vernon Lee’s Oke of Okehurst
Oscar Wilde