

Similar Themes, Different Readings: A Comparative Visual Social Semiotic Analysis of Selected Paintings

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“Every canvas is a journey all its own.”– Helen Frankenthaler

1. Introduction

One of the major characteristics of contemporary culture is that it can be described as one of *Signs* due to the proliferating number of signals in our daily life. Of the most powerful types of signs are the non-verbal ones as they employ techniques such as emotional design, color psychology, visual influencers, digital signage and esthetics to impact the viewer. Such methods can be found, for example, in fashion design, advertising, cinema, photography, architectural design, and even dance. This is true to the extent that, “it is difficult these days to find a single text which uses solely verbal English” (Goodman, 1996). Extending the meaning of literacy to images, the notion of *Visual Literacy* now refers to the capability to deduce meanings and interpret implications from information found within visuals. Images, as all visual representations, “are never innocent or neutral reflections of reality...they re-present for us: that is, they offer not a mirror of the world but an interpretation of it” (Midalia, 1999, p. 131). For that reason, certain questions arise as “How can we come to justified and grounded meaning(s) of the picture?”, and “How can we understand the basic structure of an image text?” (Hermawan, 2011, p.147). The answer to such inquiries proposes that there should be a systematic structure on which analysts can depend while interpreting the layers of meaning in visual texts as a highly coded system of signs.

Specialists making use of notions from linguistic theory to answer such questions by looking into non-linguistic modes belong to the recent paradigm of Visual Semiotics described by (Hermawan, 2011 p. 5). This recent trend draws upon Systemic Functional Linguistic Theory, created by M.A.K. Halliday (1994), and is based on the contingency that language can be interpreted as a socially-based semiotic system. This model asserts that any semiotic form is

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bound to reflect the world around us—the Experiential or Ideational Meta-function—to reveal specific aspects of the relation between the producer and the receiver—the Interpersonal Meta-function—and will manifest genre-specific structural features that bring all elements of the form to a meaningful whole—the Textual Meta-function. Implementations of such frameworks to non-linguistic forms of communication have become prominent due to investigations into the visual semiotics of displayed artistic expressions as architectures, sculptures and paintings by O'Toole (1994), and the proposition of a “grammar” of visual design in general, as well as educational, contexts by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006).

2. Aim and Importance of the Study

The opinion that art is a mere *representation* is now outdated and has been replaced by the view that art is an *expression* as it “reflects the inner state of the artist” and expresses “the outer manifestation of an inner state” in an intimate “process-product” association (Hospers, 2018). In other words, art realizes the ways in which matters are viewed by the artist, rather than being mere reproductions of events, places, objects, and people (Arnheim, 1974; Wolf & Perry, 1988). When elements of a certain mode are brought together to form a new configuration, they create a work of art. Before bringing this artifact to the light, these elements were present but not in similar patterns; artistic “creation is the re-formation of these pre-existing materials” (Hospers, 1955). In artworks there are prevailing themes or motifs that are diversified through various approaches in different works of art; a case of *unity-in-variety*. Hosper (1955) explains this case by saying:

If every line in a work of art were entirely novel and different from the other ones, there would be enormous diversity but no unifying connecting links, and if there were simply a repetition of the initial theme or of entire sections of the work ... there would be unity but no variety.

A way of preserving both *unity* and *variety* is having distinctive versions of the same dominant theme.

In addition, and most importantly, because artistic expression necessitates a medium, the elements of the medium of painting are the paints on the canvas. A viewer “reads into the script attributing to works of art qualities of human moods, feelings, emotions—in short, *affects*” (Hospers, 1955). These *affect*—expressions of emotions and thoughts—are realized or achieved

through the artistic choices of mediums that the artist has at his disposal. Also, because meaning is not intrinsic in signs, to interpret signs as expressive and communicative forms certain norms, principles and structures need to be adopted. Visual semiotics seeks to reveal how understanding visuals is wrongly deemed as effortless and fundamental although they are ideologically-loaded and involve multi-layered levels of potential meanings and, therefore, has as its underpinnings the interpretation and description of these layers. Its tri-functional model aids the analyst in distinguishing between mere Representation of subject-matter, the Modalities by which the artist chooses to involve and capture the onlooker's attention, and the Compositional systems he uses to create a unified configuration (O'toole, 2003).

In light of all the above, the main concern of the present study becomes investigating how varied pictorial elements in paintings depicting the same theme can render different interpretations despite unity of subject-matter. The specific aim of this study is to examine how the systemic artistic choices made by the artists in the paintings under investigation compare to, or contrast with each other, thus reflecting different meanings or readings notwithstanding their corresponding themes. To this end, this endeavor involves an exploration of the entities depicted in the paintings – their Representational functions – the methods of engaging and involving the viewer in the paintings – their Modal functions – and their governing layouts that cohere the elements of the paintings – the Compositional functions – all of which comprise the visual *language* of the painters.

The principle assumption underlying this study is that paintings, as a source of semiotic communication like language, employ elements that comprise a systemic description of their *grammar* and of the painters' *language*. More precisely, the premise is that visuals in general, and paintings in particular, consist of a set of choices made against an array of other possible choices from the systems of visual techniques available to the creators of these displays, and are, therefore, structured according to distinct functions. The artist is thus the *visualizer* who creates an intended effect or conveys a specific meaning or message through manipulating these fundamental visual elements.

Accordingly, the principle research question of this study is: How can visual semiotics models be utilized to discern how paintings with similar subjects can function at a variety of levels, and be interpreted in divergent ways despite similarity of subject-matter?

This main research question can be broken down to the following more specific sub-questions:

1. What are the similarities and differences between the three paintings under investigation at the level of the Representational function?
2. What are the similarities and differences between the three paintings under investigation at the level of the Modal function?
3. What are the similarities and differences between the three paintings under investigation at the level of the Compositional function?

The importance of the present investigation lies in that it may more adequately inform us as viewers when appreciating a work of art, and eventually change the standards by which these works are customarily appraised. In addition, visual design grammars can help us become aware of the fact that images in general, and paintings in particular, are not replicas of reality as they give us only clues from which the viewer can deduce an array of readings. The painter has already *seen* on our behalf and selected his artistic choices according to his intentions. These inspirations meant to initiate a dialogue with the viewer may be overlooked if not brought to proper attention (Jeffers, 2002 p. 11-12.). Whether one agrees with the interpretations of the present analysis is not as important as the awareness they bring about for the reason that they are not meant to reveal a single truth, but rather to enhance our appreciation of our visual world. Another point in favor of the present study is that, to the present researcher's knowledge, no research has been done exclusively on visual images, let alone on paintings, concentrating more on multimodality and the interplay of semiotic modes in texts. Furthermore, the few works found utilizing visual semiotics frameworks have only partially employed it concentrating predominantly on the compositional function which shows paucity in studies using all three functions.

3. Theoretical Background

Visual semiotics, the perspective adopted in this study, involves “the description of semiotic resources, what can be said and done with images (and other visual means of communication) and how the things people say and do with images can be interpreted” (Jewitt & Oyama 2001, p. 134). Resources that are visually presented can, subsequently, lend themselves to analysis from a functionalist approach; as with various semiotic resources, they convey meaning by jointly performing various meta-functions. Drawing on theories of communication and language of Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), a group of linguists attempted to interpret non-linguistic modes through linguistic identifications. More precisely, these linguists, drawing on Saussure's

concept of *sign*, attempted to view language as a semiotic socially-based system thus positioning language within a broad semiotic framework. Therefore, such linguists endeavored to analyze such subject-matters as the *grammar* of images and the *language* of artworks.

These *visual grammarians* contend that visuals, as a means of communication, also project and exchange messages to potential viewers via the artists'/producers' modification of the artistic elements they select. According to this school of visual semiotics, meaning-making is not contingent on formal linguistic devices, but could be channeled through other non-arbitrary forms and codes that reflect the projections of the human mind. Within the area of image analysis, the most noteworthy publications is that by Gunther Kress and coauthor Theo van Leeuwen: *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* (2006) which represent a "social semiotic theory of representation" (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p.12). As for displayed arts, reinterpreting the meta-functions of Halliday, Michael O'Toole studied the language of displayed art in his seminal publication *The Language of Displayed Art* (1994) where he examined how visual modes as classical art, sculpture and architecture embody, and thus project, meaning. The major advantage of these frameworks is that they leave space for diverse interpretations of a visual form; the various systems outlined in their models are configurations of possible options for the producers of the visual to select from. This of course, resonates with the SFL conviction that language should be interpreted as having *meaning potential* according to the choices made by the interlocutors.

3.1. Visual Grammar

The idea of applying SFL to images is derived from Kress and van Leeuwen's assumption that:

Visual structures realize meanings as linguistic structures do also...For instance what is expressed in language through the choice between different word classes and semantic structures is, in visual communication, expressed through the choice between, for instance, different uses of color, or different compositional structures. (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p.2)

Kress and van Leeuwen's aim in producing a "grammar of visual design" is to assert that the objective of visual semiotics should be the "connected meanings" rather than meanings reflected in singular elements of the visual (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p.1). Accordingly, the use of the term *grammar* suggests that

their endeavor to connect form with meaning is analogous to the linguistic method used by discourse analyst where they examine how words are grouped to form clauses, sentences, and, eventually, whole discourses or texts, and that “grammatical forms [are seen] as resources for encoding interpretations of experience and forms of social (inter)action” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p.1). A summary of their framework is illustrated in Table 1 below.

Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) propose that all images fulfill Halliday’s three major functions through the following systems. The *Representational System* refers to the visual recourses for the portrayal and the collaborations and relationships between the elements delineated in the picture. This meta-function comprises two sorts of portrayals – narrative and conceptual; while narrative portrayals include some sort of movement marked by a *vector*, conceptual portrayals show members as generalized, fixed and consistent. The *Interactional System* meta-function indicates the sources which build fictitious connections between the viewer, the artist and the participants in the picture by systems as gaze, size of frame, perspective and modality. The *Compositional Systems* meta-function indicates manners by which Representational patterns and Interactional principles collaborate into significant units. The Compositional system manages the manner by which the image is created. Composition deals with the connection between the initial two meta-functions by means of three interrelated sub-systems: information value, salience, and framing.

Table 1
Visual Structures of Meta-functions (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006)

REPRESENTATIONAL FUNCTION	INTERPERSONAL FUNCTION	COMPOSITIONAL FUNCTION
Processes: Narrative Representations: * Action (Actor & Goal) * Reactional * Speech and Mental	Contact: * Image Act * Gaze (direct or indirect/demand or offer). Social Distance: * Size of frame (close up, medium, long shot etc.) * Intimate/Personal * Social * Impersonal	Information Value: * Top/bottom placement (vertical axis). * Left/right placement (horizontal axis). * Balance (or balancing center & margins).
Conceptual Representations: * Classification processes * Analytical processes * Symbolic processes	Involvement & Power: * Vertical angle	Salience:

Participants (vectors)	* Horizontal angle	* Foregrounding & backgrounding
Circumstances (setting)	Attitude: * Subjective Image * Objective Image Modality Markers: * Color * Contextualization * Representation * Depth * Illumination * Brightness * Coding Orientation	* Relative sizing. * Contrasts in tones & sharpness of focus. Framing (weak and strong): * Clear spaces or actual frame lines. * Contrasts in tones and/or colors. * Structural elements which divide visual space. * Vectors producing a hierarchy of elements via arrangements of abstract graphic elements. * Similarity and differences in size or volume in co-occurring images.

3.2. The Language of Displayed Art

The philosophy behind O’Toole’s framework of analysis/interpretation of visual communication can be stated simply as follows:

Michael Halliday's Systemic-Functional linguistics offers a powerful and flexible model for the study of other semiotic codes besides natural language, and its universality may be of particular value in evolving discourses about art (O’Toole, 1994, p.159).

O’Toole’s attempt to utilize the three Hallidayan meta-functions in his framework for semiotic analysis has proved to be viable because art forms embody meanings and are expressive social-semiotic productions; accordingly,

what would apply to language would also be applicable to them. O’Toole’s valid contribution was adapting these meta-functions to incorporate visual arts and thus making them code-specific for their non-linguistic messages. O’Toole, similar to Kress and van Leeuwen, reinterprets the SFL meta-functions—the ideational as Representational, the interpersonal as Modal, and the textual as Compositional—in an attempt to put forth intriguing analyses of the messages and meanings visual modes can convey. Accordingly, in O’Toole’s framework, it is through the Representational function that portrayals of the world, states and action are encoded, and through the Modal function the relations between the piece of art and the viewer are expressed, and finally the geometric structures and cohesion framings are formatted within the Compositional function.

Table 2
Functions and Systems in Painting (O’Toole, 1994)

UNIT/ FUNCTION	REPRESENTATIONAL	MODAL	COMPOSITIONAL
PICTURE (WORK)	Actions, Events	Focus: Perspective	Gestalt: Framing
	Agents-patients-goals	Clarity, Light	
PICTURE (WORK)	Narrative	Colour, Scale	Verticals
	Scenes, Setting,	Volume	Diagonal
	Features	Gaze: Eyework	Proportion
	Portrayals, Sitters	Paths	Theme
		Rhythms	Line
		Intermediaries	Rhythm
		Frame	Geometrical forms
		Weight	Colour Cohesion
		Modality: Fantasy	
		Irony Authenisity	
EPISODE	Group and sub-actions	Symbolism	Relative position in Gestalt, in episode and to each other Alignment of forms
	Scenes	Intertextuality	
	Portrayals	Scale to whole	
	Side sequences	Centrality to whole	

	Interplay of actions	Relative prominence Interplay of modalities	Interplay of forms Coherence of forms
FIGURE	Character Act / Stance / Gesture Clothing components Object Position	Characterization Relation to viewer Gaze Gesture Contrast and Conflict: Scale,Line,Light,Color	Relative position in Gestalt, in episode and to each other Parallelism/ Opposition Subframing
MEMBER	Basic physical forms: Parts of body Objects Natural forms, Components	Stylization, Attenuation, Chiaroscuro, Synecdoche, Irony	Cohesion: Reference, Parallelism, Contrast, Rhythm

As mentioned above, the resources or systems O’Toole employs as tools for semiotic analysis of art-based forms of communication—the Representational, Modal and Compositional systems—resemble many of those used by Kress and van Leeuwen. However, these tools/resources are distinctively employed by O’Toole to explain how visual modes realize meanings and there are additional resources in his framework that are exclusive to displayed artworks as Chiaroscuro, Attenuation, and Stylization. For example, O’Toole uses the system of Composition in the traditional sense of artistic composition of artworks and means by it how the coherence of the systems of an art piece creating an impression sense of visual comprehensiveness within the painting. The alternatives the artist chooses from the accessible systems within the framework to convey his message and engage viewer need not be deliberate or purposeful, yet both these parties share a *language* of possibilities of meaning that can examine and explain these decisions methodically. O’toole’s system is valuable as a beginning stage for this deliberation of potential meanings, and that is why it is invaluable to the present study.

3.3. Past Studies

Visual communication, by definition, employs visual resources to convey messages and information. Due to its numerous genres, several perspectives have been used to study it; to mention a few: media (Price, 2015), psychoanalysis

(Diem-Ville, 2001), anthropology (Collier & Collier, 1986), and content analysis (Bell, 2011). What are most relevant to the present investigation are those studies that have dealt with visual communication from a social semiotic perspective in an attempt to describe and interpret visual semiotic resources. A commonality between these studies, however, is that they have basically employed advertisements and pictures as their data, yet none, to the best of the present researcher's knowledge, have used paintings exclusively as their targeted data with the exception of O'Toole himself.

In order to show how productive the Systemic-Functional model can be for the analysis of visual art texts, O'Toole (1994, 2011) analyzed Botticelli's *Primavera* and Sir Russell Drysdale's *The Gatekeeper's Wife*. O'Toole (2008) analyzed Rene Magritte's painting *The Human Condition* to examine how Magritte's "obsession with congruence to produce incongruities" and his "play with logic" (O'Toole, 2008) breach the principles of visual perception to deliver his message. In another attempt to subject art to semiotic treatment within a broadly systemic-functional approach, O'Toole (2003, 2018) endeavored to offer an adequate interpretation of Rembrandt's *The Night Watch* in terms of the systems which comprise the "language" of the painter. To emphasize the interplay of textual details and larger thematic purposes to create an open-ended and continuous approach to the interpretation of artistic texts, otherwise known as the "hermeneutic spiral", O'Toole (2018) analyzed and interpreted Frank Hinder's painting *Flight into Egypt* using basically the same framework: a trio-functional analysis and an interpretation that relates the painter's choices to the implied visual message.

O'Toole (1994, 2011) compared the visual structures of Bruegel's painting *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* with the lexico-grammatical structures in W.H. Auden's poem *Musée des Beaux-Arts* which was his response to Bruegel's painting. His purpose was to explore whether the systemic choices Bruegel had made in the three functions –Representational, Modal and Compositional – were comparable to the systemic lexico-grammatical choices Auden had made from English as described by Halliday's three functions. Similarly, Tuckwell (2009) presented a comparative analysis of the poem *Five Bells* by the Australian modernist poet Kenneth Slessor, which pays homage to the poem *Salute to Five Bells* by the contemporary Australian painter John Olsen. The aim of the study was to show that a powerful framework for semiotic analysis can display the common features of meaning-making across all semiotic modes. The study found that in both the mural and the poem, there was a series of consistencies in the elements of each meta-function that allow the viewer or reader to feel a sense of calmness and security.

Roland Barthes was the first to apply ideas of semiotics, as it developed from linguistics, to visual images, for example, food advertisements, photography and motion pictures. Essentially, he sought to analyze how the meanings we attribute to images are not a *natural* result of what we see; that is, images are not self-evident and universal. In his seminal semiotic essay *Rhetoric of the Image*, Barthes (1977) analyzed an advertising image, the Panzani advert, and used it to show how different messages are conveyed by a system of signs. By analyzing the aesthetic and ideological connotative *meanings in the image, that are invisible and implicit but can be inferred at the levels of the production and reception of the message*, Barthes found a rich layering of meanings which lead him to conclude that *verbal text and image interact in press photographs and advertisements*.

Another such study is that by Myllylä (2017) who studied how children are visually represented in advertisements aimed at adults by making use of Kress and van Leeuwen's Visual Grammar. To that end, three volumes of *Time* magazine were selected and a classification system of the different categories of the data was devised. The study concluded that there is indeed a certain way to how children are represented and that there have been some changes throughout the years. Bokek-Cohen (2017) analyzed 48 sperm donors' baby photos from six of the largest American sperm banks, using Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2006) method. Issues as how these photos were used to transmit messages to prospective recipients, and whether there was a correspondence between donors' verbal narratives and meanings encoded in baby photos were addressed. The study concluded that the photos were in fact strategic and served to engage sperm recipients in imaginary relations with donors.

Stoian (2015) also used an image advertising honeymoon packages to illustrate how Kress and van Leeuwen's grammar of visual design can be applied to various visual domains. The conclusion includes practical implications of the theory, pointing out how it can help professionals make more adequate use of visual communication in order to convey information and persuade more successfully. Using Norman Fairclough's 3-D model and Kress and van Leeuwen's grammar of visual design to analyze the data, *Vahid & Esmae'li* (2012) analyzed six different advertisements to investigate the intentions and techniques of consumer product companies to reach more consumers and sell more products. The results of the study showed that when a private producer intends to persuade the viewer to buy a special product, he gives the power to the viewer, but if the producer was the government, it tries to show its power.

Also using sample ads extracted from *Time* magazine, Najafian & Ketabi (2011) attempted to investigate the application of the social semiotic approach

proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) in analyzing ads discourse. Two points emerged based on this study: first, that advertising is a crucial factor in the dissemination of ideological values in any social discourses, and second, that this discourse is not in any sense neutral but mediated as the aspects of social life represented in the advertising pass through the particular linguistic as well as social semiotic resources. On a similar vein, Jewitt (1998) analyzed images of sexual health posters and leaflets for young people to explore how male sexuality is managed at a visual level in sexual health leaflets and posters, and examine the notions of masculinity, gender and sexuality which inform the imagery in them. Jewitt concluded that the images in sexual health promotion leaflets and posters reinforce the dominant ideology of masculinity and fail to address the gap between young men's realities and cultural norms of masculinity.

4. Methodology

The three-dimensional analytical framework employed here at the implementation level will be an eclectic one that draws upon aspects of both O'Toole's (1994), and Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) frameworks which offer an empirical toolkit for critical visual analysis. Because this study has as its data classical works of displayed art, and seeks to analyze paintings, O'Toole's framework would seem to be most pertinent since it offers a model for negotiating meaning in artistic works in general, and presents certain *code-specific* systems for paintings in particular. In addition, selected systems and subsystems derived from the detailed reinterpretation of the meta-functions by Kress and van Leeuwen will be employed for a comprehensive analysis. Generally speaking, the meta-functions will be interpreted in this study in similar ways to those used by O'Toole and Kress and van Leeuwen and will be extended to the Rank Scales where applicable.

The *Representational function* will be regarded as the identification of all the elements or entities that are represented in the painting, in addition to the actions in which they are engaged and the setting in which they are found. Any symbolic elements and portrayals would also go under this function.

Under the Representational function, the study will be investigating:

1. Type of Representational process:

- A. Narrative: involving an event or action designated via vectors (imaginary lines) between Actors (doers of action), and Goals (recipients of action)
- B. Conceptual: timeless static representation of participants:
 - a. Classification: showing taxonomy (superordinate and subordinates)
 - b. Symbolic:

- Symbolic Attributes: have connotative attributes
 - Symbolic suggestive: connotation by means of another element
 - c. Iconography
2. Identification:
 - A. The represented participants
 - B. Interaction between represented participants (vectors).
 - C. Attributes: qualities and characteristics of the participants (gestures, facial expressions, stance, physical qualities, clothing)
 3. Activity: action(s) / processes taking place in the portrayal (Narrative representations)
 - A. Action processes: involving vectors
 - a. Transactional processes: vector originating from Actor to Goal
 - b. Non-transactional: Goal not present in portrayal
 - c. Bidirectional: Actors and Goals simultaneously
 - B. Reaction processes: vector formed by gaze from Reactor to Phenomenon
 - a. Transactional processes: both the Reactor and Phenomena are present
 - b. Non-transactional: Phenomena is absent from portrayal
 - c. Bidirectional: two Reactors

The *Modal function* will be considered as the function by which the artist engages the emotions, mind and interest of the viewer through systems as rhythm, perspective, illumination, color, scale, and gaze.

Variations in Modality will be discussed along a continuum of the use of:

1. Address: Gaze at the viewer (direct = demand or indirect = offer).
2. Involvement: of the viewer
 - A. Use of artistic Perspective: built-in point of view
 - B. Perspectival functions of the horizontal angle of the portrayal:
 - a. Frontal point of view = inclusion
 - b. Oblique point of view = detachment
3. Power: Perspectival functions of the vertical angle of the portrayal
 - A. High angle: viewer in position of power
 - B. Low angle: represented participants in position of power
 - C. Eye-level angle: equality
4. Social Distance: According to the framing technique
 - A. close up shot = face and shoulders = intimacy
 - B. medium shot = top half of torso = close social distance
 - C. long shot = full body = far social distance
5. Modality Markers: Credibility of portrayal

- A. Contextualization: background and context
- B. Illumination: Chiaroscuro
- C. Color: Saturation, Modulation, *Sfumato*, *Hue*
- D. Depth
- E. Path
- F. Rhythm
- G. Representation: Stylization, Attenuation, Characterization

The *Compositional function* concerns the decisions about the arrangement of the forms within the pictorial space through which the visual can be recognized as coherent and making sense.

Variations in compositional choices will be discussed in terms of:

1. Gestalt: Organizational systems of portrayed elements: Verticals, Horizontals, Diagonals, Geometric forms...etc.
2. Information Value:
 - A. Top/bottom positioning: top = ideal, bottom = real
 - B. Left/right positioning: left = given, right = new
 - C. Center/margin: center = nucleus, margin = dependents
3. Salience: Prominence of elements in the portrayal can be heightened or lowered by the use of elements as colors, focus, size, and positioning.
4. Framing: Degree of connectivity between elements of the portrayal

This study will confine itself to analyzing the pictorial elements in the data that emerge as a result of the specific artistic choices made by the artists, and not as representations of the major characteristics or features of the artistic eras or movements the painters and paintings belong to. In other words, in interpreting and analyzing the data, reference will only be made to the specific elements of the visual discourses of the paintings and their different interpretations as interrelated with the artists' particular selection of structures accessible only within the paintings. There will be no utilization of any external references as tendencies or influences of the different genres of art. Such is the delimitation of the study.

A final point about the procedure of the analysis is that, although it proceeded by analyzing the meta-functions in the sequence of Representational, Modal, and Compositional, there are instances of overlap between the three functions. The researcher found it impossible to distinctly discuss each function separately because certain subsystems within the major categories are interdependent and may occur simultaneously. Accordingly, relevance was the main criteria in the

analysis of systems to avoid redundancy, and for the sake of lucidity and coherence.

4.1. Description of the Data

The paintings under investigation in this study are three paintings all sharing the same theme of *Madonna and Child*; a theme that has “spanned multiple artistic eras” (“Madonna and child; A digital art gallery,” 2010) and has endured up to the present times. Because of the perpetuity, endurance, and universality of this pivotal theme, it was selected as the subject-matter of the paintings. Despite it being mainly common in Christian art, artists choosing to depict this eternal theme have managed to exhibit variety and originality throughout the years with each expressing his own interpretation of the theme via idiosyncratic artistic elements. Meaning *My lady* in Italian, the term *Madonna* was adopted by many European languages including English to refer to *Mary, Mother of Jesus* and gradually became a prevalent theme in Western art, music and literature. Developing into an iconic image, the Madonna was depicted as a symbol of “... both the purity of the life to which she gave birth, as well as the everlasting life that Jesus Christ represents to followers of the Christian faith” (Pelican, 2018).

The paintings which constitute the data of this study are: *Santa Trinita Madonna* by Cimabue, *Madonna of the Goldfinch* by Raphael, and *Madonna of Loretto* by Caravaggio; all Madonna-and-Child-themed. These paintings have been chosen as the focus of this study because they utilize almost all the visual structures that can potentially be used across the range of identified functions; certain paintings may tend to use specific types of visual forms and not others. In addition, these specific artists were chosen as they were pioneer artists of their artistic eras. Regardless of the tremendous number of artistic creations of painters that viewers have seen in museums and art galleries all over the world, only a moderate number of these painters have been generally perceived as being exemplary. Three of such outstanding painters are Cimabue, Raphael, and Caravaggio. Immortal in their excellence and artistic execution, these three fine artists have risen above time and aesthetic expression to make history, which makes them most worthy of study. The following are brief descriptions of the three artists, and their selected artworks.

Cimabue (1240 – 1302), is accredited as the forefather of Italian painting, and celebrated as the last Italian painter of the Byzantine era. After his death, the influence of Byzantine on Italian art began to reside because “... he had exhausted all the possibilities inherent in the tradition” (Gibbs, 2003). An eminent artist in Florence and Rome, Cimabue’s famous frescos—paintings on walls or ceilings— are distinctly renowned for his time. Of his most acclaimed

artworks is the monumental *Madonna of Santa Trinita* which was painted as an altarpiece—a large panel—for the Santa Trinita Church in Florence around 1300, and is now located in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, Italy. It qualified as an ideal sample for analysis in this study as it thoroughly showcases the major characteristics of Cimabue’s style (Nagel, 2010).

Advancing from the 1300s to the 1400s, we reach the period art historians title the *Renaissance*, meaning the ‘rebirth’ of the culture of ancient Greece and Rome. Raffaello Sanzio da Urbino (1483-1520), popularly known as Raphael, is considered one of the great virtuosos of the Renaissance. A talented painter and architect, he is best known for his paintings of the Virgin Mary—the Madonna. Although he died at an early age, Raphael was a prolific painter who “blazed a comet’s trail of painting throughout the apex of the Italian Renaissance” and was “alongside Leonardo Da Vinci and Michelangelo, considered an equal part of the holy trinity of master artists of his time” (Sethi, 2018). The second selected artwork for this study named *Madonna of the Goldfinch*, also housed in the Uffizi, was created by Raphael during his period in Florence, 1505-1506, where he produced numerous other renowned paintings, but “...it is the *Madonna with the Goldfinch* to represent, more than any other work, the painter’s distinctive aesthetics” (Belozerskaya, 2002).

A prominent Italian artist of the 16th century, Michelangelo Merisi Caravaggio (1571-1610), better known by his byname Caravaggio, was famous for his religious works. Despite being a controversial painter described as having a “volatile character”, Caravaggio influenced many of his contemporaries as well as his successors during his brief artistic career (Graham-Dixon, 2019). Of his masterpieces is the *Madonna of Loretto* or *Pilgrim’s Madonna* (1604–1606) located in the Cavalletti Chapel of the church of Sant’Agostino, Rome. This painting is the third painting under investigation in this study chosen for its brilliance and because it mirrors Caravaggio’s unique aesthetic imaginaries. Although criticized by later critics for its unorthodox treatment of the holy theme, the *Madonna of Loretto* gained great appeal as a devotional image among the populace (Graham-Dixon, 2019).

5. Analysis and Results

5.1. Analysis of Individual Paintings

5.1.1. The Madonna of Santa Trinita – Cimabue.

5.1.1.1. The Representational Function

The overall represented theme in *The Madonna of Santa Trinita*, as with the other selected works of art, is Mary, the Mother of Christ, with the Christ Child. This work of art represents this theme with a rather static scene, or portrayal, of the two divine figures. Rightfully denoted as the *Maestà*, meaning Majesty, Mary is here enthroned, sitting on a throne surrounded by eight angels and four prophets. Mary is in center position in the composition with the young Christ Child sitting on her lap. The angles – four on either side of the throne – appear to be supporting the throne. The prophets are situated under the throne.



Figure 1. Santa Trinita Madonna – Cimabue

The representation in this painting is predominantly Conceptual as the Represented participants are almost static and timeless, as opposed to Narrative representations where the participants are engaged in an obvious action or event; more of a “Portrayal” (O’Toole, 1994). Conceptual representations can be divided into Classification, Analytical and Symbolic processes (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, pp. 79-110). From these subcategories, the Conceptual representation in Cimabue’s painting can be categorized as one embodying a Classification process aiming to display how the represented participants relate to each other. The Madonna and her Child are placed in a superordinate position, while the angels, at the left and right wings of the composition, and the prophets beneath the holy couple are subordinated. The slight action taking place in the representation can be considered as a narrative; in the painting Mary (Actor), while inclining her head towards her holy Child, gestures him (Goal) with her right hand to the devotees as the path to their salvation, her Child (Actor) in turn raises his hand to bless them. Mary’s gesture is a *transactional* one because the Goal is depicted in the visual, while Christ’s blessing gesture is a *non-transactional structure* in that the action is missing a Goal as the Actor is pointing to entities not present in the image (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 63).

The representation of the prophets beneath the throne can be considered an Episode or a side sequence to the focal scene. They can be identified as Old Testament – or Hebrew Bible – prophets who foresaw the forthcoming of the Messiah due to the scrolls they are holding. The two prophets on the far left and

right bottom sides of the painting are looking up towards Mary, while the other two in the middle gaze outward the painting's frame. The scrolls the four prophets are holding are all open, signifying wisdom and knowledge.

At that time, Mary was a very significant figure as Christ was somewhat intimidating to the medieval mentality. Due to that, Mary grew in significance as an intercessor to her Holy Child who would intervene to convey their prayers to Christ. This accepted capacity of Mary brought into being what is known as the *Madonna Cult*, or the *Virgin Cult*. What is most relevant here is that it is precisely this image of Mary that Cimabue depicts in his painting. This image originates from a Byzantine icon known as the *Hodegeria* meaning 'She who shows the Way' in Greek, or 'Our Lady of the Way' as she is referred to in the Western culture.

The Symbolism in the painting is exalted to the rank of Iconography. The iconography of the Madonna and Child is made pronounced and salient by the gold halos surrounding their heads—*symbolic attributes*—, and by the immense enclosing panels, elaborate architecture, and scale. In addition, the positioning of these prophets at the base of the composition under Mary's throne seems to be symbolic signifying them as the basis for the New Testament. According to Christian theology, it is within their scrolls that the advent of Christ, his Incarnation and the Virginity of Mary were alluded to. The interplay between the two scenes—Mary and Child and the prophets situated beneath them—exalts the *prophetic heritage* of Mary and her son as represented in the painting.

5.1.1.2. The Modal Function

Modally, this is not a painting that employs linear perspective. There does not appear to be one specific perspective in which the viewer is situated, but rather multiple viewpoints. When visually focused on the throne, the viewer's eyes seem to look across at the Holy Mother and, surprisingly, the viewer, when looking down at the seat and the step in the foreground, is also looking up at her and the ceiling of the throne. The viewer's eyes tend to wonder around the painting without guidance as to where to rest within the portrayed architecture. Even the foregrounded Hebrew prophets in their irrational space under the throne appear even closer to the eye, yet, as mentioned earlier, this might be a Christian perspective suggesting literally that the Old Testament was the point of departure of Christianity. Notwithstanding the diverse viewpoints, the eye cannot but focus mainly upon the central perspective of the Holy Mother who is saliently positioned. Generally speaking, this lack of obvious perspective gives the painting a celestial atmosphere.

However, if we are to speak of any Perspective in *The Santa Trinita Maestà*, it would be that of *Reverse Perspective* where the height of a figure is made relative to his or her importance rather than distance from the eye and depth of imagery as in the case of linear perspective. This reversed or *pseudo* perspective is persistent throughout Christian iconography. The logic behind it is that if figures are depicted larger-than-life by way of reverence, they would be given due status.

At the Rank of Figure the Characters are mainly distinguishable by the face, stance, attributes and clothing. Generally speaking, the Characters lack physicality as they are portrayed as supreme rather than realistic. Accordingly, at the Rank of Figure, what visually strikes the onlooker is the large unrealistic scale of the Madonna. At the Member Rank, her figure, body parts and features are elongated—her fingers, hand and nose are very long—her wide stylized eyes are almond-shaped, her face is triangular shaped, while her mouth is rather small. Her motionless figure is also highly slender and attenuated severely lacking in volume and physicality. This representation does not reflect the qualities of an actual human figure, but rather of a goddess, or an archetypal devotional entity. The Madonna's Clothing also adds to this image as she is dressed in a grandiose cape which drapes her full body worthy only of nobility.

In contrast to Mary's large scale, we have these small-scale angels framing the Holy Mother and Child on both sides, with miniature figures of prophets under them. Another Modal aspect of the angels at the Rank of Figure, besides their smaller scale in comparison to Mary's, is that they seem to be posed one above the other rather than spatially distributed defying the earthly laws of gravity. They also seem to be identical exhibiting conventionalized faces. Their floating weightlessly around the holy figures adds to their stylization and abstraction. They are also not sharing the two holy figures' demanding gaze as they obliquely gaze aside or off the frame of the painting.

The Santa Trinita Maestà was thus painted in what is technically termed the flat *hieratic style* where certain figures are assigned importance by enlarging their size in comparison to the accompanying figures in the overall composition of the work of art. Such disproportionality could only serve to express a hierarchy between Mary and the Christ child and their surroundings underscoring the notion that they are marked as more significant and noteworthy. The golden halo shown above her head emphasizes her holiness, underscoring the heavenly realm as opposed to reality.

The other prominent Figure in the depiction is The Christ Child sitting on the Madonna's lap. Christ is also frontally depicted, although slightly turned towards his mother, with two fingers pointing at the viewers as if bestowing a blessing

upon them. Although in the appropriate full-body scale compared to Mary, his small head is not proportional to the size of his body. However, what is most intriguing about the depiction of Christ is that he is not rendered child-like. He is depicted having features of an adult, a wise person of mature age. The blessing gesture, accompanied with the sobriety and solemnness of his steady look at the viewers, appears to force the viewers to concentrate and demands them to pledge allegiance to their Savior. As with Mary, his attire reflects his intended image as he is seen wearing a wise man's or a philosopher's robe. Such non-naturalistic depiction of the Christ Child can be explained as being symbolic of Christ being an omniscient *man-of-wisdom*, and age is thus used to connote such traits. As with the Blessed Mother, her Child is represented with a gold halo motif representing holiness. It seems as if Cimabue's emphasis on iconographic formality rendered Mary's portrayal as more of a goddess than an earthly mother, and Christ's more of a wise man than a child.

As mentioned above, in Cimabue's *Santa Trinita Maestà*, the figures are highly stylized; the similarly stylized setting—consisting of a profusion of gold—reinforces such a portrayal. The represented Participants are forcefully demarcated by line against a flat golden background enriched with geometrical tracery representing a heavenly divinely lit space for those holy figures to occupy, detaching the setting of the painting from any sort of earthly realm and projecting it into a different sacred dimension. On the one hand, the luxuriously decorated background Cimabue chose as a background for this holy scene, by the use of gold leaf, gives a unique *contextualization* to the Holy figures. This golden backdrop also helps to directly engage the viewer by bringing the figures to the surface of the painting. On the other hand, the scene's background/setting is completely devoid of any details (buildings, greenery, animals...etc.) which may distract the viewer from the main figures; this *de-contextualization* of the scene also forces the viewers' attention onto the characters depicted.

At the Rank of Member, one cannot help but admire the elaborated and refined throne occupied by the Virgin Mary. The throne is both monumental and spectacular, designed with elaborate carved wood and ornamented with gems. The importance of this throne lies not only in its grandiose stylization, but in the fact that it could be considered an example of a humble trial on Cimabue's part to apply perspectival effects. The large scale of the throne also aids to locate Mary and her surrounding angels at the upper part of the composition, bringing the front parts of the throne closer to the viewer's angle of vision. The refined elaborated throne where the Madonna sits also befits the characterization of a majestic Virgin and Child.

In terms of Texture, the fine ornamental motifs replicated on the throne, footstool and pillars further establish the density and symmetry of the scene as a whole. Another noteworthy Member of the composition is the drapery, which is also outlined by small gold striations, yet also presented flat with no modeling using light variations.

What is also Modally obvious in the painting is the frontal pose of the two Holy figures. Instead of onlookers moving around in the space of the composition, we are here faced with a precise and accurate frontal view. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) a frontal angle is used to increase the level of Involvement and decrease alienation identification between the viewer and the represented participants. This sense of inclusion is strengthened by the direct gaze. In addition, in Conceptual representations as the one at hand, a frontal angle would denote a demand of some kind through direct “visual form of direct address” and “image act” (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006, pp. 117-118). In other words, The Madonna, The Christ Child and the angels are all demanding the attention of the viewer by noticeable direct eye-contact aiming to establish a connection and a feeling of unity. Such close-up portrayal representing the Holy figures from a personal intimate distance, not only solicits a request/demand or invitation, but also projects a sense of authority, a sense of the remarkable and the divine.

5.1.1.3. The Compositional Function

What helps augment this visual demand is the framing of the composition which is very compact due to the vertical panels encompassing the represented participants. Such dense framing augments the request for attention and personal involvement. As concerning the size of Frame—how much of the represented participants is presented in the visual frame—we have the full body of the Madonna portrayed from a long shot placing a barrier between the participants and the viewer, or between the divine and the mortal, which is interpreted as creating a substantial social distance between them. Despite the fact that a long shot is used to place the full figure of the subject within his surroundings, here the Madonna almost fills the whole view adding to her salience and prominence. With regard to power relations in the painting, the represented participants are depicted from a low angle meaning that the viewer is looking up to them. This is suggestive of represented participant’s magnificence, and the inferior position of the viewer; again, the magnificence of the divine opposed to the inferiority of the mortal.

In terms of the credibility and truthfulness of the depiction, the painting is far from any realistic portrayal. The above analysis has offered multiple reasons

responsible for the low modality—credibility—of the visual. The disproportionate size of the Madonna and saints, the unrealistic portrayal of the Child Christ as an old man, and the inclusion of floating angels at the margins all play a role in lessening the credibility of the painting. The characters have been abstracted via stylization. As such it is not a totally accurate representation, but a stylistic painting form in which the main features of the represented participants have been presented in a non-realistic way to portray them from particular attitudinal viewpoints, ones which the painter holds and wishes to convey to any potential viewer(s). Furthermore, the choice of a two-dimensional representation of the represented participants where they are presented as flat and lacking volume, let alone their high stylization, also further diminish the believability of the depiction. The absence of context also indicates a low degree of correspondence to reality.

The Composition of the painting is meticulously constructed in a geometric fashion imparting a sense of harmony on the whole scene. The Virgin Mary and Child are situated at the precise horizontal center of this symmetrical composition rendering them the center of the viewer's attention and the most salient of figures. Such positioning of the Madonna and Child as the *Ideal*, as opposed to the *Real*, resonates with the representational hierarchical of importance.

The structure of the Gestalt of the painting is apparent in the parallel positioning of the vertical columns on either side of the throne and of the compartment where the prophets are situated. This type of Composition is referred to as a *trptych* arrangement with a margin-center-margin structure. Such parallelism along a vertical axis enforces the compositional tightness of the painting and renders the frame close-fitting and confining, and, inevitably, contributes to the stability of the painting. In addition, the framing borders of the painting appear to compress and confine the figures. When the elements in a visual are closely connected with almost no gaps between them, as in Cimabue's painting, they send a message of unity and signaling differentiation and individuality (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 203).

5.1.2. The Madonna of the Goldfinch – Raphael

5.1.2.1. The Representational Function

The Representation in the *Madonna of the Goldfinch* is a narrative one as the represented participants are engaged in certain actions. Mary, accompanied by the Christ Child and John the Baptist, is seen reading a book, most probably the Bible, interrupted only, as it were, by her maternal duties of caring for the two children. She is looking lovingly at the children. John, who is seated at her left, is seen extending forward a bird, a goldfinch, to Christ who in turn is patting its head. Christ is standing between her legs leaning back on her lap. The trio is surrounded by a naturalistic landscape.



Figure 2. Madonna of the Goldfinch -- Rafael

Mary's endearing gaze at the children is a Reactional process as the action is performed through an eye-line; Mary is the Reactor, the entity looking at something, and the children are the Phenomena, the objects of the Reactor's gaze. The action of John offering a bird to Christ is, on the other hand, a *transactional* Action process, with the former as Actor, and the latter as Goal.

The painting comes across to the viewer not only as the depiction of holy figures, but also as the portrayal of an earthly young mother looking down lovingly at two children; one presenting a pet to the other, the other stroking its head tenderly. Tenderness is the shared sentiment between the three figures; Christ leans back on his mother's lap which is extended forming a throne-like seat for him to rest upon, and places his foot affectionately on hers, while Mary extends her arm to embrace John. All three are engaged in an intimate act of proximity and relatedness. The shared emotions are climaxed by Mary's melancholic facial expression as she stars at the goldfinch—the potent symbol of the passion of Christ foretelling his agonized future.

The characterization of the Madonna presented here is what is known in the literature as the *Madonna of Humility*. Mary is seen sitting humbly on the ground, as if on a rock or a tree stump in a somewhat pious serene state. Raphael intentionally depicts an idealized version of Mary as a mother with inherent tendency for compassion and love. Generally speaking, the classicized posture of the three figures, which resembles poses of classical sculpture, embarks an atmosphere of holiness and eminence on them. Raphael communicates this, for example, through the elegance of Christ's body as he lifts his arm up, strokes the goldfinch, and tilts his head back. The lingering faint and barely visible halos

above the three characters heads also bestow a sense of holiness to them. Yet the holiness conveyed is more humanistic than dire or profound due to the figures' ideal beauty and the fluidity and gracefulness of their gestures and movements. However, Raphael's naturalistic occupation with human anatomy, emotion, and intimacy does not overshadow the holy couple's divinity; they are still the Virgin Mary and the Child Christ, but more artless and genuine. The figures in this painting are neither muscular nor rough, but rather exhibit details that render them naturally beautiful. Raphael has attempted to humanize deity.

A touch of naturalism is also present in the nakedness of Christ which not only suggests innocence, but also alludes to human nature in the choice of his presentation as a true-to-life baby. Naturalism is also evident in the pastoral or rural setting employed as the background of the painting emphasizing the serene state of the depicted characters. This calm idealized landscape of blue skies, rising mountains, peaceful lakes and leaved trees serves as a naturalistic truthful environment which the viewer can relate to and believe. Although usually symbolized by a white dove, the clouds drifting above Christ's head could be said to allude to the Holy Spirit, as in the Old Testament, the Spirit of God appeared within clouds.

Madonna of the Goldfinch is abundant in Symbolism. The dominant symbol in the depiction being the goldfinch representing the passion of Christ as it was alleged that a Goldfinch had rested on Christ's crown of thorns when he was being crucified and blood stained its plumage causing the red spot on the bird's head. As such, the bird is the focal point of attention of the three characters in the painting on the one hand, and of the viewers on the other. Although humble, Mary exhibits an air of divinity symbolized in her red and blue clothing signifying the sacrifice of Christ and the church respectively. The delicate flowers surrounding the trio connote innocence, humility and sorrow. The book Mary is holding, believed to be a holy text, is a symbol of her faith. The animal skin attire of young Saint John is indicative of his nature as a hermit, and the bowl tied to his waist is a direct foreshadowing of the baptism of the Child Christ. Such symbolism represents instances of Symbolic Suggestive processes in that only one participant—the Carrier or the symbol—is present in the depiction and the connotative meaning is attributed to the Carrier by other factors according to the context of the visual, and not through another participant (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 105).

5.1.2.2. The Modal Function

Modally speaking, the absence of a direct gaze towards the onlooker in the painting suggests the offering of some kind of information to the viewers.

Accordingly, there are no vectors stemming directly from the represented participants towards the viewers; all the vectors indicate participants within the visual frame and require the viewer to be aware of how they are interacting with each other. Mary's gaze is directed at the goldfinch and not at the viewer in a request for him to contemplate the bird's connotation. Her stare at the goldfish makes it the focal point of the painting for the viewer and is ominous of the future grief of her son. The two other figures in the depiction, the two children, are looking at each other, although Christ's line of sight can also be understood as directed upwards towards the heavens.

There seems to be a sort of silent dialogue that is visually transmitted between John and the Child Christ as if the former is condoling the latter for his grim future, and, accordingly, Christ looks up at heaven in submission and acceptance with understanding of what the goldfinch being presented to him symbolizes. All gazes of the three characters in the painting are tenderly melancholic as though contemplating Christ's suffering and crucifixion and come together in one cohesive glance of shared apprehension. Consequently, the painting can be said to have an oblique point of view distinctive of a low level of involvement on the part of the viewer. The painter's modal choices here do not impose anything on the viewer, but solicit his involvement only to the extent that he observes the situation and ponders the gravity of the intended message. The eye-level viewing angle creates a neutral power position between the represented participants and the viewer who is considered an equal. Consistent with refraining from demanding any connection from the viewer, and exhibiting no power relations over him, is the full-body wide shot view utilized to view the represented participants. Such a shot performs two functions: first, it places the viewer at a certain distance from the depicted subjects, and second, serves to establish the relation between the represented participants and their surroundings.

Through the figures' harmonious exchanged glances, purity and pleasantness of faces and lenient bodily gestures Raphael was able to create a vigorous yet graceful image of ideal beauty that served to connect all the elements of the work of art. This soft graceful Rhythm of the painting is strongly conveyed by the *atmospheric* Perspective used by the artist. *Aerial* or *atmospheric* perspective produces a sense of depth by employing diminishing scale; with the backward recession into the space of the painting, the edges become softer and the tone of the colors lighter and less intense, decreasing the modulation of colors in the background. By diminishing forms and fading colors, this perspective imparts a sense of deepness onto the verdant atmosphere of the depiction positioning it far away from the viewer who can vividly sense the tranquility and peacefulness of

the setting. The Madonna's shoulders link the naturalistic background to the figures in the foreground by resembling the soft graceful curves of the depiction.

By employing Modeling, Raphael was able to create natural figures with mass. The term modeling is closely associated with the Italian term, Chiaroscuro, where contrasting light and shadow creates an illusion of volume. Using a light calm color palette, Raphael deliberately varies between light and shadow in the painting to give his figures dimensions and allow them to take up actual space. This shading technique, although not used extensively, is especially evident in depicting the faces of the characters, their clothing and in highlighting the anatomy of their bodies.

Delicacy of Color, where characters are draped in delicate tints of pink, blue and green, showcases Raphael's objective of presenting a rather utopian serene portrayal. This intention is also reflected in the gracefulness of mood which has as its source the classical idealized landscape. Applying the *sfumato* technique—by gradually shading colors and tones into one another—also emphasized the serenity of mood especially by dissolving the background into the horizon. However, the serene simplicity of this rustic atmosphere is, as it were, at odds with the picture's grave emotional meaning and implied messages. The artist ingenuously counterpoises form and meaning to bring both forth vividly to the onlooker.

The use of various visual Modality markers such as full detailed contextualization and panoramic background that adds depth to the depiction, the naturalism of the details of the represented participants, the barely visible haloes above the holy couple's heads, the modeling illumination, and the color modulation all suggest a naturalistic depiction i.e., the adequate Modality or credibility of the painting. However, Raphael's *Madonna of the Goldfinch* seems to represent an ideal rather than a realistic world. The way Mary is portrayed presents her as a model of ideal female beauty. Even the physic of the Christ Child and John the Baptist corresponds to ideal physical beauty. Christ stands in this incredibly elegant pose unusual for a child. The naturalistic background is also picture-perfect, more picturesque than factual. Along the continuum of Modality, the painting seems to be nearer to classicism and idealism than realism; the painter has envisioned the composition in a perfect or ideal manner. Accordingly, the painting can be said to represent a *sub-reality* than an actual one.

5.1.2.3. The Compositional Function

Lit meaningfully, the figures are set within a three-dimensional space as Raphael chose to unify this beautiful depiction within a *pyramid* Composition.

The pyramid is defined by the three figures with Mary's head at the top-center of the vertical space—its vertex—, and Christ and John at its right and left bottom angles respectively—the two sides of Mary's lap. Despite Mary being at the head of the pyramid, it is the Goldfinch that occupies the focal point of the composition. The Goldfinch, being the principle element of the painting conveying its main message, is rightfully saliently positioned at the nucleus of the composition. The broad pyramid-shape composition serves to convey balance, stability and strength, making the composition congruent with its consequential predictive message of Christ's crucifixion symbolized by the Goldfinch.

In addition, this well-balanced and highly symmetrical composition forms a well-defined Path for the eye of the viewer which serves to render the painting easy to follow. Our eyes can move easily from the three figures in the foreground, to the middle-ground, and finally to the natural scene in the far-background while noticing the details and the information the painter means to convey. This composition is also in-keeping with the chosen naturalistic setting as nature is abundant in pyramid-shape compositions as in high trees and mountains. This natural setting also gracefully frames the centered figures adding to the overall sense of tranquility of the painting.

Such sense of perfection and balance connoting the eternal is even present in the characters' engagement with each other and the ongoing emotional dialogue they are sharing. The unifying composition is enhanced by the interlocked glances and interplay of gestures of the figures; while the Madonna is looking down at John, the latter in turn is looking at the Child Christ who reciprocally and receptively looks back at him. The artwork's pyramidal composition forcefully conveys the intimacy between the figures and the loving familial relationship between them. Mary's body seems to serve as a unifying structure that fuses all the elements of the piece of art together.

5.1.3 The Madonna of Loretto – Caravaggio

5.1.3.1. The Representational Function

Gracefully postured on the threshold of an entrance, Mary, attired in an overflowing gown, is depicted cradling the Child Christ while gazing at two pilgrims kneeling before them in an act of adoration. Both haloed by a golden circle, they seem to be accepting homage from the two devotees that have toiled in the weary pilgrimage. From the gesture of his



Figure 3. Madonna of Loretto -- Caravaggio

delicate hands, Christ is shown to be in the act of the benediction of the beseeching pilgrims, with a shadow cast on his face. The pilgrims, who appear to be disheveled and filthy, are in close proximity to the holy Mother and Child. It is as if their weariness from their journey has subsided giving way to the overwhelming awe that has engrossed them at the sight of the Holy couple. It is not without reason that the painting is also called “*The Virgin of Pilgrims*”.

The painting thus depicts Narrative processes as the Represented Participants are all engaged in some kind of activity. Mary and the pilgrim’s gaze at each other constitutes a bidirectional Reactional process as the action is delivered via their exchanged looks which makes them both Reactors. However, the pilgrims are also simultaneously engaged in another *transactional* Action process which is the act of adoration, with the pilgrims as Actors and the Holy couple as Goals. The Child Christ is also seen taking part in a *transactional* Action process of blessing the two pilgrims which makes him the Actor and them the Goals. At the Rank member, a vector seems to extend from the feet of Child Christ to the eyes/feet of the male pilgrim which can be interpreted as seeking devotion.

The painting’s specific theme originates from the *Cult Devotion* to the Madonna of Loreto widespread in the late 16th century. The Virgin’s modest home, where the Holy Child grew up, was believed to have *flown* from Palestina to the city of Loreto seeking sanctuary from the ravages of war at that time. This home had a significant attraction to the faithful who had nothing to offer but their devotion. The pilgrimage to Rome was said to bless with eternal salvation; accordingly, the *Madonna di Loreto* could be considered a tribute to this holy journey.

The volume of the holy couple seems to be in contrast; while Mary is depicted as weightless to the extent of floating, Christ appears as to be of substantial weight. Another striking contrast is that between the appearance of the Holy Mother and Child and the pilgrims in terms of attire and physical condition. While the former are dressed in iconic blue and red robes of fine-texture fabric, the latter are depicted wearing rugged peasantry impoverished clothes. In addition, the angelic sculptural physique of Mary, and the vigorous robust figure of the Child Christ, are also juxtaposed by pilgrims’ evident frailty and weariness augmented further by their postulation. Given that the pilgrims also appear to be a mother and son, this contrast might signify that they are in the presence of a superior transcended version of their mortal selves.

Concerning Symbolism in Caravaggio’s *Madonna di Loreto*, we find that the opening of The Holy House where the holy couple is situated is an example of a Symbolic Attributive process as two represented participants are involved in the process. The doorway, the Carrier, suggests that it is symbolic of a doorway to

heaven; that it is the pilgrims' path to salvation because it is depicted as the threshold of The Holy House, the Symbolic Attribute. This symbolism is substantiated by the fact that the Virgin was considered to be the *universal mediator* and could further be extended if we are to consider that the painter saw the pilgrimage as a metaphor of earthly life.

5.1.3.2. The Modal Function

On the Modal level, none of the represented participants' gazes are directed at the viewer; all vectors are directed among the participants. Their oblique gazes denote a weak sense of inclusion of the onlooker which is usually signaled by a direct vector between participants and viewer. However, the vanishing points of the represented participants' gazes, where the gazes are located, do not go outside the visual frame, but are directed at each other; Mary and Christ look directly at the pilgrims who reciprocate their looks with passionate ones. This choice of portrayal seems to serve an important purpose; it determines the speech function of the visual as one of an Offer of information, as opposed to a Demand, requiring the viewer to become aware of the interaction between the represented participants, and contemplate freely the interplay between the levels of meaning in the painting. The full-body close up shot of the represented participants creates an intimate direct relation between them and the viewer, and breaks barriers between the latter and the artwork. Such a choice allows the viewer to identify effortlessly with them, and to easily acknowledge their offer to consider the meanings and messages they are sending.

The Rhythm of the painting is quite striking; there is energy or a sense of instability and motion that is transmitted to the viewers, not only as the outcome of the way the figures are presented, but also due to the painter's unique lines and forms denoting movement. The most obvious of these transitional rhythms become apparent from the Madonna's bodily movements. The upper part of the Madonna's body, which faces outward towards the pilgrims, seems to be rotating in an opposite direction to the lower part which is twisting her backwards into the opening. Furthermore, the Madonna's crossed bare feet are in an elevated position suggesting a rotating motion of dance. A sense of dynamism is thus projected by the raising of the Madonna's center of gravity. This technique is seen in how Mary's torso is curved away from the rest of her lower body while leaning her body weight on one leg demonstrating a dynamic rotation. This is an instance of modeling via illumination as the turn of her body is created by the transition from highlights to shade. Accordingly, the visual reading of this scene in the painting reveals the use of the technique of *contrapposto*, or *counterpose*, used to capture bodily movement. There is also this perception of movement

between the Holy Mother and Child. The embracing arms of the Madonna support the weight of the rather hefty Child as if presenting him forward to the pilgrims.

The Rank of Member, feet of the male pilgrim are positioned in the bottom-right corner of the foreground of the painting reaching towards the edge of the frame of the painting, so close to the viewers in fact, and in their direction, that it seems as if those feet are within their reach. This technique of *foreshortening*—reducing the scale of an object to give it prominence and depth— and depicting the feet facing the audience inevitably captures their attention and urges them to respond. By thus positioning the pilgrims' figures, Caravaggio extends his artistic composition to include us in the pilgrims' prayer before Mary, as if we too are pilgrims on an arduous journey. This technique also serves to give prominence to the pilgrims.

The prominence of the pilgrim's feet at the bottom of the composition, together with the main source of light projected from the left, set the Perspective of the painting so that it is seen from the left and from a low vantage point. Such a low angle shot indicates power of the represented participants over the viewer, the authority of the divine over the mortal. Such power relation is in keeping with the specific theme of the depiction which is the adoration of and prayer to the holy couple.

Caravaggio's manipulation of Light in the altarpiece is another one of the most capturing of Modal techniques employed. Utilizing *chiaroscuro*—contrasts of light and shadow—resulted in dramatic Modeling of the depicted figures and emphasizing of details especially of facial expressions. An illusion of volume and mass is created which, in turn, adds vividness and energy to the composition. On the whole, the dark simple background of the painting is contrasted with the highlighted figures, thus magnifying details and substantiating the authenticity of the depiction. Such sharp dramatic contrast also creates vividness. The color palette used suits the chiaroscuro effect in that it is exclusively made of earthy ochre colors ideal for spaces that are dimly lit. Also, *tenebrism*—using darkness to illuminate other areas by comparison— allows forgoing the exaggeration of details. We can see this in the simple background and surroundings of the composition. It seems that every aspect of this canvas was purposely done so we do not avert our eyes from its main subject.

The Path of light created, whether subtle or marked, emerges from an out-of-frame source in the left-hand corner of the canvas lighting the head and feet of the Holy Mother, and the whole of the Holy Child, in addition to the heads, hands, and feet of the pilgrims. Visually, this pathway of light deliberately guides the audiences' vision/attention through the composition upward from the male

pilgrim's feet towards the Virgin and Child. All figures are minimized as the attention of the viewers is directed to the Holy Child, the only fully enlightened character, suggesting that the pilgrims are aspiring after the *threshold of light*, or after the glory of the glowing Child. Although the light of the Holy Couple radiates onto the pilgrims, the illuminated unblemished complexion of the former is dramatically juxtaposed with the dark sullied figures of the peasants. Caravaggio also highlights the intimate relation and strong connection between the Madonna and her Child and the pilgrims by casting light on the vertical door frame that connects the two couples. The deep darkness of the Setting contrasts with the semi- and fully lit figures granting them salience and prominence.

A differentiating feature of Modality in this painting is the tendency to emotionally involve the viewer with its immediacy, intimacy and realism, thus heightening the Modality—credibility— of the visual. The characters in the artwork do not adhere to the traditional iconography as they are realistically depicted. The style in which the Virgin Mary is presented is very humanlike; she comes across to the viewer as tender and gentle conveying, as it were, an ultimately simplified and realistic version of the divine. Notwithstanding her seemingly floating posture, Mary's appearance is very much like that of an ordinary woman, and the Child Christ is a typical healthy little boy. Had it not been for the adoration of the pilgrims, and Mary and Christ's fine halos subtly shining amidst the intense darkness of the painting, the couple would hardly come across to the viewer as divine. Along a continuum of reality, the pilgrim's bare dirty feet directly facing the viewer place the composition at the extreme of factual existence. Mary's hand lovingly pressed against the body of her child-like son together with her appearance, and the pilgrims' soiled feet give prominence to the realism in the painting as an *everyday* interpretation of divinity.

5.1.3.3. The Compositional Function

Caravaggio generates multiple Compositional *diagonal axes* in this painting guiding the viewers' eyes over the depiction as a whole. A primary compositional axis is created by the visual relationship between the two couples depicted in the altarpiece directing the viewers' eyes along a diagonal moving upwards towards the upper-left corner of the painting connecting the source of light to the pilgrim's feet passing by the Madonna's line of sight. Another diagonal axis intersecting the dominating diagonal is created by the staffs of the peasants resting against the wall of the doorway forming a kind of vertical obstruction or barrier between the holy pair and the pilgrims. A final horizontal axis also cutting across the vertical one is created by the border edge of the step of the threshold on which the Madonna is seen standing. Such multiplicity and

overlapping of compositional diagonals, creating crisscross diagonals, serves to further intensify the dynamic motion in the painting. At the top center of the vertical axis of the composition are the Virgin and Christ who are thus represented as the Ideal, not in the sense of epitomic, but of being holy and most valued. At the bottom of the composition are the pilgrims who are thus depicted as Real and true to life, and therefore, rightly position in the lower status half of the painting. Given that there is no obvious focal point to the composition, it is considered a *polarized* one where the center—the act of adoration—acts as a mediator between the Ideal and the Real drawing the viewer's attention to the relation between the Holy couple and their devotees.

5.2 Comparison of the Paintings

In an attempt to answer the study's main research question and sub-questions (See Section 2), the coming section will present a discussion of the main visual semiotic features of each painting according to the results of the visual semiotic analysis. The discussion will also compare the findings to stand upon the commonalities and variances between the paintings as reflected in the artists' choices.

The *Madonna of Santa Trinita* comes across to the viewer as depicting figures of authority and sovereignty soliciting devoutness and piety. Onlookers cannot but find themselves in awe when viewing such a majestic monumental portrayal of the Madonna and Child; Cimabue's unique artistic choices evoked such an impression. His highly stylized characterization of Mary and Christ, their emotionless facial features, and incongruent figures all contributed to the sense of formality perceived by the viewer. The holy figures' stern confronting gaze led to them being perceived as inapproachable. Their frontal view, which flattens the three-dimensionality of features, shows that the artists had no concern for volume or modeling which led to the absence of physicality in the painting. In other words, they were represented in an abstract transcendent manner. Also, the choice to depict the Represented participants in a Conceptual hierarchical structure shows that the artist preferred to express size and position as relative to importance and not reality. Modally, the painting exhibits no movement from light to dark, no shifts of color, and a sublime background without contextualization. Furthermore, the unique technique of reversing the rules of linear Perspective, and the highly elaborated geometrical Composition further distance the depiction from reality, towards abstraction.

Raphael's *Madonna of the Goldfinch* includes various standards that are different from those found in Cimabue's *Madonna of Santa Trinita*. Here we come one step closer to *Naturalism* as evident from the elegant graceful portrayal

of the Holy Couple that tries to reconcile reality as we know it, and our understanding of the divine. Although still spiritual and celestial, the viewer can identify with them to a greater extent because of the artist's aesthetic options. In other words, despite the fact that the figures in Raphael's painting are *Idealized* to convey the spiritual sense of his subjects, they are also *Naturalistic* in that their features, clothes, gestures and expressions, which are, to a great extent, believable. Here we have the representation of Mary as the *Madonna of Humility*, seated on the ground, instead of on a grandiose throne as with Cimabue's Madonna. With Raphael we have lost the frontality of the figures that poses a demand of interconnection on the viewer and is replaced with an oblique view that offers him a message to be contemplated freely. The Represented participants in Raphael's painting are depicted from varying points of view which is the more natural way people are seen. The Represented participants are also no longer static or isolated as several interactional Processes are perceived between them making their representation a Narrative one as an alternative to a Conceptual one with separateness between the participants. Furthermore, they are now represented as emotional and passionate as opposed to impassive and restrained. To the opposite of Cimabue, Raphael's choices definitely show an interest in proportion and the human form reflected in the truthfulness of his figures.

The naturalism in the painting also emerges from the attention the painter gave to Modeling via the mild use of the Chiaroscuro lighting technique that gave mass and volume to the figures. Such naturalism is further interpreted by the artist's choice of atmospheric Perspective realized by the saturation of color to reflect truthful portrayal of elements seen at a distance. This perspective also adds practical depth to the portrayal through its diminishing scale into the background creating an illusion of space as the viewer can easily move in the painting's visual *Path* from foreground, to middle-ground to background. Another vital variation to Cimabue's portrayal is that we here have an earthly setting of a natural landscape which the viewer can actually envision occupying. A final point is the three-dimensional pyramidal Composition the artist selected as an overall design for the painting to create a sense of stability and balance in the depiction. This Composition is also a natural one as pyramid structures are found in nature and in the viewer's everyday environment. A touch of *Classicism* is therefore detected due to the emphasis on firm structure, perfection, simplicity and proportion. In light of the above, we can safely conclude that the visual semiotic reading of Raphael's painting exhibits attitudes of both *Naturalism* and *Classicism* while trying to reconcile natural physical appearances with divine religious elements.

In contrast to Cimabue's static representation, and Raphael's serene stable depiction, is Caravaggio's dynamic and emotionally intense portrayal of Mary and the Child Christ in *The Madonna of Loretto*. The two most prominent features that a viewer can sense about the painting, based on the interpretation of Caravaggio's selection of visual semiotic systems, are its highly realistic Modality and dominant energetic Rhythm. In Caravaggio's painting Represented participants are neither *Stylized* nor *Idealized* as they are represented as down-to-earth human beings. When looking at the style of how the Madonna and Child have been presented, we find that they have been characterized as a common young impoverished mother carrying her baby. They are extremely believable despite being designated by halos and adored by pilgrims. This is what Langdone (1999) was referring to when she stated that Caravaggio smoothly "weaves together layers of reality and illusion." (p. 287), and what Friedlaender (1955) alluded to as Caravaggio's "realistic mysticism," expressing "a great simplification of devotion" (p. 125). Such realism is in addition to the harshly true-to-life appearance of the humble filthy weary pilgrims.

Besides the Representational choices in the Characterization of the Figures, Caravaggio's masterful manipulation of *Chiaroscuro* intensifies the Realism of the depiction. Such light modeling through the division of light and shadow suggests Volume and mass, rendering the pictorial content three-dimensionally authentic. Such employment of shading is very different than that in Cimabue's painting where it is basically used to show texture of fabrics, and in Raphael's portrayal where we have clear even light. *The Madonna of Loretto* also exhibits a compelling perception of immediacy as if the artist was capturing a transient moment in time. This feature is due to the dynamism and energy the painting is charged with that vividly depict its content. Such movement is projected by the artist's choice to give close attention to the details of the positions of the bodies of the figures and their gestures and moves which are meticulously reflected in his lines—interrupted contours—and forms to the extent that the viewer feels the figures are moving out of the painting into his space. Caravaggio sacrifices the pure linear qualities of figures, as those found in Raphael's, for the sake of veracity and emotionalism. The motion in the painting is further indicated by the diagonal composition that energizes the depiction and moves away from the notions of stability and constancy represented by horizontals—as with Raphael—and verticals—as with Cimabue.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of this study was to investigate how the analysis of the artistic language of artists via visual semiotic models could render different readings of visuals despite unity of theme. Having conducted such an analysis, the findings indicated distinct differences between the toolkits that the artists under investigation utilized to convey their visions. Such variance in artistic choices led to diversified generations of the universal theme of Madonna and Child. What the three paintings had in common was the wealth of iconographic information as they all mainly represented the same subject-matter. What they also shared was the “psychological salience” that holy figures as the Madonna and Christ have for viewers (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 63). However, the unique esthetic resources selected by the producers of the works of art reflected their individual approaches to this theme. These particular attitudes can be interpreted as follows.

With Cimabue, emphasizing the figures’ spiritual significance was more important to the painter than artistic technicalities as perspective, modeling and rhythm. It is as if he was more concerned with conspicuously urging the viewers to communicate with the divine, than to create approachable convincing representations they can associate with. With Raphael, we find a more naturalistically portrayed Holy Couple idealized only by the elegance and grace of their characterization. Raphael’s subtle message in the painting is more encoded as he does not represent Mary and Child iconically, but strived to present his work with extreme detail and symbolism to create a graceful image of an ideal harmonious beauty that was simple and pleasing. Such an attempt to present the divine as natural was with the aim of offering the viewer a scene into whose spirit he could enter, and with whose figures he could identify and, thus, contemplate the beautiful scene before him. Caravaggio did away completely with any ornamentation or aesthetic effects in presenting Mary and Christ as his utilization of systems was meant to render a realistic Holy Couple. Caravaggio also chose to emphasize the emotional rather than the spiritual overtones of a specific moment in time allowing the figures to move into the viewer’s space creating an intimate relation with him so that he can become fully involved in the scene.

In relation to the above interpretations, we can safely say that divergence and similarity between these three visuals can shed new light on the concept of visual semiotics. The findings support Ledema’s (2003) definition of *resemiotization* as the practice of ‘how meaning making shifts from context to context, from practice to practice, or from one stage of a practice to the next’ (p.41). The three painters’ conscious decisions to emphasize one artistic feature over another to

translate their own perspectives appear to have *resemiotized* the theme of Madonna and Child. The paintings mainly differed in the way their propositions/messages were addresses to the viewers and the tools utilized to promote the artist's statement towards the relationship between man and God.

The three portrayals of Madonna and Child also seem to represent a continuum of verisimilitude with *abstraction* at one extreme, *naturalism* mid-way, and *realism* at the other extreme, with each range reflecting a different vision according to the artists' choices. Abstraction being realized by presenting venerated *icons* noted for their austerity and which bring to mind the actual holy personage as in Cimabue's painting. Naturalism was expressed by focusing on representing *devotional images* and attempting to portray them as true-to-life, but while focusing on the ideal and the aesthetic, as Raphael did. Realism was reflected in Caravaggio's decisions to forgo artistic conventions and artificiality, to portray life-forms accurately, and to emphasize the mundane.

The paintings can also be said to differ in what can be called their *Moods of Visual Appeal*. Cimabue appears to have employed visual *Ethos* by appealing to the authority and sovereignty of the Represented participants. Raphael resorted to perceptible *Logos* by appealing to the viewers' intellect via presenting them with an ideal picturesque scene for them to contemplate. Caravaggio utilized visually engaging *Pathos* by stimulating the viewers' emotions and sentiments through portraying an epic and dramatic scene depicting familiar common figures.

The findings of this study implicate that artworks of similar subject-matter most likely differ in their implications and impact according to the artist's esthetic choices and artistry. The results also show that visual semiotics frameworks can aid in detecting shifts of emphasis, distinct approaches, and differing conceptions of the visual image, all which constitute the particular visual language of the artist. Such elements could create numerous artistic vantage points from which multiple variants of the same subject can be produced.

This study had as its data different paintings dealing with the same motif, where the influence of the variable of subject was eliminated. As a suggestion for further research, it would be most interesting to investigate how artworks of the same subject and for the same artist, where both variables of subject and producer are controlled, could be interpreted differently. This is because, in accordance with the findings of this study, it is not different themes that produce different artworks, but it is the different visions that result in different visuals, and personal visions can change overtime.

“Every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter.” — Oscar Wilde

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