The Material of Myth: Fabricating Form in Sixteenth Century Venetian Painting

This paper proposed to deal with the representation of fabrics in Venetian paintings of the Renaissance, focusing on the work of Veronese during the second half of the sixteenth century, considering his representation of textiles in relation to both contemporary tastes in Venice and in relation to the importance of the textile industry to Venice and the Venetian economy as a whole.

The paper will begin with a consideration of the representation of textiles during the early Renaissance in relation to the increasing importance of the silk-weaving industry to the Venetian economy and to the perceived identity of the state throughout the fourteenth century. This is reflected in the textiles of Venetian paintings of the time, where a carefully constructed Venetian image was taking shape in the hands of artists like the Bellini.

Having outlined the importance of the representation of textiles in the formation of a recognisably Venetian image within the city’s visual culture, the paper will move on to consider the importance of textiles in the art of Veronese. That the representation of fabrics constitutes an important role in Veronese’s art is to state the obvious and is a contributing factor to his somewhat derogatory historic reputation as an artist interested primarily in decorative effects. Without negating their obvious visual appeal, the contemporary nature and specificity of Veronese’s textiles will be considered as an important element in the formation of a personal and specifically Venetian identity for the figures portrayed. As Venetian ingredients and the products of Venice’s most prestigious industry, Veronese’s textiles are statements of personal wealth, status and identity on the part of patrons who were closely linked to the Venetian political regime – signifiers of civic identity, materialising the myth of Venice for patron and public alike.

The final part of the paper will deal with the decoration of the Ducal palace in 1577 by Veronese and his contemporaries. Here, the importance of textiles in relation to the creation of the myth of Venice reaches its ultimate climax. Seeking a visual form to express the perfectly symbiotic relationship between industry, art and state which Venice was said to embody, artists draped the nude female form of ‘la Serenissima’ with luxurious fabrics synonymous with the climax of Venetian textile production. To date, the importance and specificity of these draperies has been regarded as mere decorative elaboration of all’antica pictorial sources and conventions. But the nude ‘Venetia’ represented on the ceilings of the Ducal Palace positively required sumptuous and uniquely Venetian draperies to enhance her image, verify her identity and display her status and creative power. On the ceilings of the Ducal Palace, Venice takes her form from the fruits of her own labour. In this way, the timeless draped nude of the Classical tradition becomes a female image of contemporary material culture, ironically at a time of impending economic decline for the Venetian state.

That the representation of fabrics could be important to the Venetian artists and patrons is borne out by the rare example of an identifiable textile worn by State
officials represented in various paintings from the 16th to the 18th Centuries, a fragment of which survives today. The very fact that such a specific allusion to status and State can be identified in artistic representation over such a time span, indicates the importance of fabric in Venetian paintings and in the materialization of the myth of Venice – essential ingredients of Venetian visual culture during the Renaissance and beyond.