

## **1. Title**

Art as Power: Italian Influence in Francis I's Court at Chateau de Fontainebleau

## **2. Abstract**

My thesis will investigate the connection between King Francis I's patronage of Italian antique sculpture and his assembly of artists for his renovations at the Chateau de Fontainebleau with the development and overall success of the French Renaissance. I will work to define Francis I's central techniques of self-fashioning through patronage of Italian art and employment of Italian artists and his relative success in 'conquering' Italy in his feud against Holy Roman Emperor Charles V through a cultural adoption and popularization of Italian Renaissance style. I will particularly focus on the lasting effects of the housing and display of these antique-style works at the lavishly decorated Chateau de Fontainebleau, and in his personal gallery, the *Galerie François Premier*.

## **3. Description of the Project**

Patron, art aficionado, lover of antiquities, and *Roi de la Renaissance*, King Francis I remains one of the most crucial and popular rulers of France's monarchy. After the long-sought-after conclusion of the Hundred Years' War between France and England in 1453, France regained the funds and stability to return to a fruitful pursuit of the arts. Francis I, who became king in 1494, shortly after the end of the War, exhibited a profound interest in Italian sculpture and mannerist style. Francis I's initial aim during his reign was to defeat Charles V and conquer Italy in order to become Holy Roman Emperor, but his military

proWess fell short of such lofty goals as he suffered a defeat at the Battle of Pavia in 1525 that rendered him prisoner of Charles V for several years in Spain. Is it possible that Francis I's remarkable incorporation of the Italian Renaissance style in his renovations at the French court served as a deliberate act of retaliation against his military failures and as a continuation of his feud with Charles V?

After the Sack of Rome in 1527, where Charles V's troops targeted and destroyed papal property including monasteries, libraries, and religious artwork<sup>1</sup>, many Italians in opposition of Charles V as Emperor sought refuge within the League of Cognac. The league functioned as an anti-imperial alliance comprised of France, Milan, Florence, Venice, and the Vatican. In addition, as the Counter Reformation declared more and more religious artwork unsuitable for display and forced many artists out of Italy, Francis I began to advertise his court as a welcoming, wealthy, and simply safer alternative workspace for Italian artists.

Chateau de Fontainebleau had long been one of the many prized royal residences of the French monarchy, but Francis I sought to transform it into an artistically lavish centerpiece of the French Renaissance. Indisputably his most prized royal project, the *Galerie François Premier* displays twelve biblically themed frescoes ornately framed by stucco relief sculpture, all of which were completed by the Italian painter and sculptor Rosso Fiorentino. Francis believed that those who could understand his complicated allegories without prior knowledge of the organization of the gallery showed authority and intellectual prowess, and he often revealed the "true" meaning of the pieces to his visitors in

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<sup>1</sup> McGowan, Margaret M. *The vision of Rome in late Renaissance France*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 57.

order to impress and assert his superiority.<sup>2</sup> Although the frescoes and statues throughout the gallery feature familiar classical symbolism and iconography, the assimilation of these many images into one singular visual repertoire renders a new system of signs and symbols specific to Francis' court.<sup>3</sup> The extensive mannerist collection provides an immersive education into the themes and styles most important to Francis in his artistic endeavors, such as female fertility, wealth from the earth, and biblical narratives.

Did Francis I intend to use his personal gallery at the Chateau de Fontainebleau as a crowning example of his richness in wealth, artistic taste, and intellectual fortitude, or did he feel that it was more important that he employ Italian court artists and commission original works of Italian-style fresco and sculpture as an outward representation of his remarkable power and unparalleled access to Italian antiquity?

Through my research, I will explore my theory that Francis I's competitive relationship with Charles V did not end with his defeat at the Battle of Pavia, but rather continued through his creative and powerful methods of Renaissance self-fashioning within the French court. Coined by historian Stephen Greenblatt, the term 'self-fashioning' refers to a 16<sup>th</sup> century trend amongst the wealthy to "an increased self-consciousness about the fashioning of human identity as a manipulable, artful process."<sup>4</sup> I plan to explore in particular the frescoes and

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<sup>2</sup> Zorach, *Blood, Milk, Ink, Gold*, 46.

<sup>3</sup> Zorach, *Blood, Milk, Ink, Gold*, 36.

<sup>4</sup> Greenblatt, Stephen. *Renaissance self-fashioning: from More to Shakespeare*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 2.

sculptures in the *Galerie François Premier* in terms of their observable elements of self-fashioning, such as the employment of his new system of visual symbolism within this space and the relationship between the central artists and the king throughout the commission process. I would like to explore the intentions behind Francis I's artistic 'conquest' of Italy and argue that he was in fact successful in 'conquering' this crucial territory of the Holy Roman Empire by facilitating a transfer of allegiances of Italian artists and by displaying existing works and copies in innovative arrangements and juxtapositions which appeared original, and which continue to gain much praise and scholarly attention today.

#### **4. Significance**

Although French art is widely recognized and studied across the globe, art from the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries is often considerably under-researched in comparison to other periods. The galleries of Versailles and the Louvre, for example, stand as striking examples of a later French Renaissance style and tend to overshadow the earlier and less-refined styles of Chateau de Fontainebleau.

In general, Art History as a field of study in France is quite extensive and developed with rich histories and world-renowned institutions. The *Académie française* (1634) and the *Académie de peinture et de sculpture* (1648) were both founded during the French Renaissance. These institutions, widely respected and later opposed by artists who eventually developed the Romantic and Impressionist styles, contributed to the founding of the Louvre Museum, followed by the Luxembourg Museum and the Musée d'Orsay. Today, France maintains its reputation for producing many of the world's most notable artists and artistic

movements. With this extensive and prestigious foundation, however, comes a strict sense of refinement that leads many French art historians to focus their research on precise periods. The narrow-study approach of French art history tends to lead to a general lack of connection between French art historical periods and other contemporary or resulting movements.

I hope to use my research to establish a complete image of Francis I as not only a crucial patron of the French Renaissance, but also as a creative ruler who used unconventional methods of art collection, artist employment, and strict control over the image of the French court to assert himself, and France, as indisputable powers of 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe. By examining Francis I's techniques of Renaissance self-fashioning as well as his particular relationships with Italian artists and architects, I will contribute a necessary investigation into the greater consequences of royal patronage, highlighting its potential to transform the historical understanding of a monarch and the successes of his reign.

## **5. Previous Work**

The French Renaissance, being a crucial movement in French art history, has been widely studied in terms of its major artists, pieces, and specificities of style. Scholarly works often situate the movement within the larger European Renaissance and examine the manner in which the French displayed their wealth and competed with other courts for the acquisition of popular antique artworks. Modern research focuses on Francis I's more notable changes in the visual representations of power, such as through his implementation of unprecedented royal portraiture in which he chose to be portrayed in fine fabrics and jewelry to

represent his wealth rather than in idiomatic poses as a war leader. In terms of the visual appearance of the Château de Fontainebleau, scholarship often focuses on more recent renovations by Henri IV and Napoleon I, of which substantially more remain today than those commissioned by Francis I. Important political events, such as the Treaty of Fontainebleau (1814) which ended Napoleon's rule as Emperor, are also widely noted in the historiography of the château.

Francis I and the Chateau Fontainebleau remain understudied in modern scholarship. Rebecca Zorach's extensive investigation of Francis I and the Gallery at Fontainebleau, entitled *Blood, Milk, Ink, Gold* (2005), analyzes the symbolic visual language of wealth and excess employed by Francis I through his renovations and artistic commissions. Nicole Bensoussan's recent dissertation also explored the Francis's court as a "new Rome" of 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe. More broadly, the study of collecting practices, patrons' motivations for commissioning work, and the connections between artistic programmes and socio-political contexts of the major European courts, has been a fruitful area of scholarship in the past two decades or so, especially since Haskell and Penny's *Taste and the Antique: the Lure of Ancient Sculpture 1500-1900* (1981). Nicola Courtright, a 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century European art historian, investigates Francis I's desire to collect and display his own collection of ancient statues and frescoes in order to "enhance his political dominion".<sup>5</sup> Courtright examines Francis' attempts to

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<sup>5</sup> Courtright, Nicola. "The King's Sculptures in the Queen's Garden at Fontainebleau," in *Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque: A Cat's Cradle for Marilyn Aronberg Lavin*, ed. David A. Levine and Jack W (Freiberg New York: Italica Press, 2010).

employ some of the more notable Italian Renaissance artists, such as Leonardo Da Vinci, and describes the difficult process that he underwent in acquiring works from exclusive collections in Rome and Florence.

Other recent French Renaissance scholarship has focused on changes in artistic styles under Francis I and in his renovation projects but fails to provide insight into his relationships with court artists, his specific motives and challenges in acquiring antique works in competition with other wealthy monarchs, and the possibility that he used art patronage in order to continue his feud with Charles V. I find that there is a lack of attention to my primary question of Francis I's intentions, and likely personal interest, in commissioning Italian-style works from his Italian court artists.

## **6. Proposed Methodology**

I plan to conduct my research through an investigation of modern secondary sources and contemporary accounts of Francis I's personality and royal interests as a patron. As an Italian artist employed by Francis I, the memoirs of Italian artist Benvenuto Cellini provide essential insight into the king's treatment of Italian artists, the organization of his court, and his specific requests as a patron. In addition, the first-hand accounts of Francis I's court from historian Jules Michelet provide colorfully contemptuous perspective of a "playboy" king who often gave greater attention to the display of his wealth than pious pursuits. I will also examine letters, such as those exchanged between Francis I and the marchesa Isabelle d'Este on women's court fashions, which exemplify the king's wide reaching access into the most exclusive courts in 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe and the

exceptionally forward manner in which tended to address other royals in his requests for favors and artworks.

In terms of first hand research, I am fortunate to spend the Spring 2017 semester in Paris, France where I have personally visited Chateau de Fontainebleau and the *Galerie François Premier* to investigate the arrangement and visual rhetoric of the space. I plan to follow Rebecca Zorach's detailed plan from *Blood, Milk, Ink, and Gold* of the complex narrative that exists between the twelve frescoes of the gallery and make my own observations of the cohesiveness, clarity of representations of historical and biblical narrative, and effects of artistic decisions. In addition, the contemporary accounts of Francis as a patron from artists Benvenuto Cellini, Leonardo da Vinci, and Rosso Fiorentino will illustrate the intentions behind the visual rhetoric of the space and the creation process and other contemporary sources will provide insight into Francis's persona and his court milieu.

Through my research, I plan to meld contemporary accounts of the French court with modern scholarship and my own observations in order to analyze Francis I's motivations, techniques, and effects of Renaissance self-fashioning. My fluency in the French language allows me to read contemporary observations and letters, as well as French art history scholarship. Although I have already read many sources, I will continue to do so throughout the coming months in order to compile a considerable amount of information on the history of Francis I's reign, his commissions and patronage, and his intentions as a ruler in collecting substantial amounts of Italian art as a means of self-fashioning.



## 7. Resources

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