Title

‘Fine Arts and Wine’: Painters show us the world of wine, its history, role and uses

I want to submit an abstract for:

Conference Presentation

Corresponding Author

Eric Beau

E-Mail

eric.beau@hotmail.fr

Affiliation

International Network of Researchers and Teaching Associates of the UNESCO Chair on ‘Wine Culture and Traditions’

Keywords

Wine History Role Use Fine Art Painter Painting Illumination Picture Master

Research Question

This conference communication aims to use painting examples to examine the way in which artists have portrayed the universe and history of wine. What are the themes?

Methods

The approach consists of drawing out themes from the paintings themselves. They are used as a basis for research, with key themes emerging through simple examination of the artwork.

Results

Manet insisted that ‘art should reflect life’. He, and 70 other master painters, demonstrate this. They confirm that they are familiar with the universe of wine, its role and uses.

Abstract

Since its most distant origins in the Caucasus, almost 7,000 years before the birth of Christ, wine has held an important place in human civilisation. It has left a rich cultural legacy which surpasses the art and popular traditions focussed on by most wine museums. The ‘Muses’ companion’, wine is represented across the arts, whether in literature, music, or decorative and visual art. Wine has interested painters in particular since Antiquity. This conference communication aims to use artistic examples to examine the way in which artists have portrayed the universe and history of wine.

The aim of this project is to make an inventory of works relating to this research criterion. The global approach consists of drawing out themes from the available iconography. Rather than illustrating predefined themes on the uses of wine and its role (as generally defined by historians) the paintings themselves can be used as a basis for research, with key themes emerging through simple examination of the artwork. The works chosen must enable contextual commentary in relation to wine. This corpus has become the framework of the Musee Virtuel du Vin (Virtual Wine Museum), which I created. It is a conceptual, web-based wine museum – a ‘museum without
walls’, to borrow the English title of the famous work by André Malraux.

Four principal themes emerge:

The ‘wine cycle’: From work in vineyards to the transport of wine, via the growing and winemaking processes, the seasonal cycle has been widely represented through miniatures, illuminations, stained glass and sculpture. It is rare in works on canvas or frescoes by master painters, who tend to focus on harvest scenes.

Still life: As though to demonstrate the reputation of wine and vineyards, a great number of artists have used them as elements in still life paintings, whether symbolically or decoratively. Such has been the case since Antiquity, as proven by numerous mosaics and frescoes from this period in Italy’s Vesuvius region. The development of easel painting allowed this new artistic genre to develop from the end of the 16th century, reaching a peak in the 17th century. Certain works contain valuable information on the dietary habits and beliefs of the period.

Divine wine, nectar of the gods, and the ‘Blood of Christ’: At its origin, painting was essentially (if not totally) religious. The influence of the Church was felt particularly strongly from the 15th century, especially after the Council of Trent in 1545. Mythological paintings (in which the wine god Bacchus, formerly Dionysus, is an emblematic figure) emerged slightly later, in the mid-1500s. The god’s supreme appetite and consequent drunkenness made wine symbolic of pleasures not just on Earth, but in Heaven too: at the ‘Gods’ Banquet table’, good food goes hand in hand with voluptuous pleasure. Wine resembles blood, that vital fluid symbolising heredity and alliance. As such, it is the privilege of gods as well as kings. To drink, to share the ‘blood of the Earth’, allows the drinker a taste of immortality. From Osiris to Christ, through Dionysus, wine is the emblem of divine rebirth.

A companion for every occasion: If scenes of this type, painted mainly in oils on canvas, first made their appearance in Dutch and Flemish painting from the 15th century, genre scenes of painting gathered momentum with the ‘Golden Age’ at the end of the 16th century. From this point onwards, at least until the last World War, wine was regularly represented in artistic depictions of daily life and scenes of pleasure. Indeed, in the work of the master painters, wine is represented more in terms of daily life and seeking pleasure than in a religious context. For a long time, wine was considered a staple. It fortified the sick, strengthened workers and appeared at every family meal. The modern cafés of the 19th and 20th centuries often played the role of a substitute family, as well as giving their customers a space in which to pass the time and sometimes to sleep. But it was essentially wine as a way of living – and living well – which dominated the imagination and popular conscience. Wine has always ‘gladden the heart of man’ (Psalms 104:15). It is associated with friendship, conviviality, love and celebration. From cheerfulness to all-out drunkenness, some artists have used wine to convey a message: from the 15th to the 17th century, to condemn wine-drinking in the name of morality; in the 18th century, to celebrate or denounce the lifestyles of the social elite; and in the 19th century, to remind us that drunkenness can lead to alcoholism. If the appetite for wine is as old as time itself, this constant re-evaluation allowed wine-drinking to assert its position in life and art in the 17th and 18th centuries. The few paintings which focus on the pleasure of wine connoisseurs were produced in the 18th century, by which point the privilege of ‘taste’ was not limited to the upper classes, but also open to the merchant class and the bourgeoisie.

Connoisseurs used colourful vocabulary to describe the colours, aromas and taste of wine. To do this, they indulged in an ecstasy of words, a kind of drunkenness.

The conference presentation will be illustrated by works from master painters, each painting attesting to one of these themes. One of the discoveries of this project was that approximately one-third of the works collected – by this point, over 400 works – are the product of ‘grand masters’, some of whom seem to bring wine into the picture at the first opportunity. Thus, of the 35 works completed by Vermeer, no fewer than six paintings portray the various hazards and pitfalls of wine. Whether major or minor master painters, these artists remind us that wine is an essential witness to our social and cultural history.
Reproductions of original works have multiplied on the internet in recent years and high-quality images are now widely available and free. The sites used for this project include specialised image banks such as the Web Gallery of Art, Google Art Project, and Wikimedia Commons; as well as the web catalogues of some of the world’s greatest galleries, mainly American, British and Dutch: the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the National Gallery of Art, the National Gallery, the Rijksmuseum, etc. French gallery websites are distinctly less ambitious, mainly because of restrictions on reproduction rights specific to France in certain institutions such as the Louvre.

The principal works consulted for my project were the art histories of Ernst Gombrich and Claude Frontisi and the works of David Arasse and Erwin Panofsky. For an outline of the universe of wine, the wine histories of Roger Dion, Gilbert Garrier, Hugh Johnson and Marcel Lachiver, the food and drink history of Jean-Louis Flandrin and Massimo Montanari and the reports from the Chateau du Clos de Vougeot seminars in Burgundy, organised annually since 2007 by the UNESCO Chair on ‘Wine Culture and Traditions’.

Manet, one of the artists most involved in the painting of wine, insisted that ‘art should reflect life’. In other words, art is the expression of social realities. He, and over 70 other master painters, demonstrate this magnificently. They confirm to us that the universe of wine, its role and uses are not unknown to them. A website like the Virtual Wine Museum thus offers an opportunity for the general public to learn about wine and its history 365 days a year – and this without the hustle and bustle of a conventional gallery – in order to better appreciate and imbibe its special vocabulary. So savoir-boire and savoir-parler go together!

* www.musee-virtuel-vin.fr (site in French)