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Broadening the Gene Pool:

The Value of the Humanities Future Success

by Michael Grillo

From the Early Medieval period until the late nineteenth century, the Roman Pantheon presented a true marvel—no other ancient monument underscored the impossibility of these later cultures building anything that could rival it. Although historians from the Renaissance onwards have treated the collapse of the Roman Empire as the cause of this loss of classical knowledge, a more subtle understanding points to an aspect significant to many public discussions today: how societies jettison knowledge deemed not immediately relevant, often irretrievably losing important human insights along the way.

The magical spatiality and technological splendors of the Pantheon made it such a commanding inspiration to Renaissance, Baroque, and modern societies that they sought to reclaim the material and conceptual knowledge that made its creation possible. While the late nineteenth century began to understand reinforced concrete, the integral role of geometry in minimizing material weight while maximizing strength, and the sequential processes of a coordinated, continuous pour, much other past knowledge remains obscured. In some cases dedicated research recovered surprising details, such as the use of ceramics as a reinforcing core material in classical buildings. Other aspects, however, remain elusive to us such as the design processes, the explorations of material capacities, the specifics of the labor that built it, the relationship between its over-arching philosophical principles and its more specific religious functions, and its broader social reception as imperial temple-site in the Ancient era, all of which may remain permanently lost.

The familiar appreciation of the humanities typically focuses on the lessons they offer us, usually those that help explain how the present came to be and how we might understand it. While certainly an important focus, this perspective overemphasizes ideas of the past that have survived because of their immediate relevance to each ensuing generation. We honor Virgil because of Dante, and him because of his significance to Chaucer, Spenser, Milton, Byron, Browning, Yeats, and Eliot. But

what did Dante offer his own time that we may have overlooked because it was not immediately relevant to later poets, historians, and philosophers? Valuing his writing for what later generations embraced closes off a greater richness that his contemporaries would have seen as the significant breadth of his contributions. Studying what Dante and his contemporaries offered their own time, separate from what we trace back of ourselves to their era, opens up windows into then-common conversations of the era shaped by otherwise lost oral traditions. Close linguistic readings of Dante and his contemporaries give evidence of faintly glimmering, otherwise forgotten, conversations whose loss impoverishes any understandings of the foundations of the Renaissance and the broader cultural traditions that drew from them.

As a complement, then, to asking how the humanities help us to understand our own culture and times, could we ask instead: How do they open up alternatives to our understanding the world, alternatives at times so at odds to our era that they seem impossible to comprehend? When we consider the writings of medieval and Renaissance mystics, their fixed devotion to the Christian deity might only serve a small segment of our era's populations; however, the intensity of their focus, with its reiterative, contemplative means of thinking, offers such an alien way of living in the world that in our insuperable difficulty in understanding it, we would likely treat it as a form of psychosis! Rather than labeling medieval mysticism as an oddity, we need instead to consider it as a radically alien intellectual discipline, one that can open realms of consideration otherwise unimaginable through more familiar means.

In a postmodern world honoring the importance of cultural diversity and relativism, we need to recognize how we can expand our intellectual scopes by including the rich wealth of historical cultures in our studies. What defined sensible living in the world of the Sumerians of Ur is so differed from our own sensibilities that we must struggle to have any of it seem rational. Yet, once we do, we gain insights into the incredible

plasticity of our species, which opens up for us understandings of how little of what we eagerly accept as normal actually is so. After all, human beings have spent most of our history living as nomads, with only the past several thousand years (a relatively short span of human existence) experimenting in settled living. Likewise, many effective models of human settlement, in their differences from current practices, tax our imaginations as to their ability to have functioned sustainably.

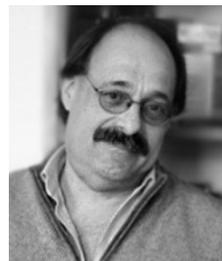
Those aspects of the humanities that persist for a long time typically originated for purposes other than for what we now value them. As an art historian, one of the aspects of culture that most fascinates me lies in how rarely intent plays out in the manner originally envisioned by artists. Researching late Italian medieval painting, I look for aspects of the works that mark some of the original drivers for each work's innovations that later generations have embraced for other reasons. For example, artists/artisans shifted from expensive, permanent mosaics, to fresco, a cheaper, less resilient material, reserving mosaic for displays of private or state wealth in public spectacle. Of course, had not the guild republics and mendicant orders demanded many relatively inexpensive paintings, fresco would not have gained the traction that made it the medium of choice as its application revealed a greater capacity of for realism. Because this realism served both religious and secular purposes, fresco became the dominant medium of the Renaissance. Later generations typically believe fresco's capacity for realism led to its widespread use, but given the failures of some of its most adventurous applications, its potential as an effective medium for realism would not have carried it alone.

Likewise, later generations assumed that the apparent realism promoted by the compositional system of perspective was the reason for its creation. As several scholars, including me, examining the origins of perspective have made clear, however, this mode of vision initially came about to emphasize the narrative voice in an era when it served as the most publicly accessible entry point to the allegorical meanings of images. In each of these cases, the vestigial function remains operative, but it becomes obscured by the new capacities that later generations find useful. Perspective still gives images narrative and hierarchic order, even as it presents its illusion of realism through modern technologies such as photography, film, and video.

Other times, however, the old impetus for a surviving idea becomes sealed off—an evolutionary

dead-end. Yet, if re-excavated, it can serve new purpose, contributing to the broad catalogue of knowledge we need if we wish to have the fullest scope of possibilities to address new challenges. Turning to evolutionary biology, we need to keep in mind that just as the most diverse gene pool best ensures the survival of a species, so too will supporting research in the most diverse realms of thought enable the humanities to contribute most substantially to our ability to face the unforeseeables of the future. The proven fallibility of human endeavor and intention across time demands that we avoid a narrow, near-sighted calculus to define value and purpose in how we understand the human condition.

In an era in which visual language has resurfaced as a dominant means of communication, past cultures can offer us much in understanding the shift away from written texts. Study in fields such as history of art might seem irrelevant to our world if we see them as solely serving their own disciplines, but if we reconsider their contributions, their potential to address directly a broad range of applications becomes possible. Predicting the future has always been a fool's errand, but so too is preparing for possible futures by focusing only on select realms of learning. An impoverished knowledge pool that is only maintained on the basis of foreseeable needs will assuredly become intellectually impoverished, debilitated, and doomed to failure. How can we hope to imagine our future, and more importantly address what it brings, if we do so using frameworks defined only by our present and most immediate needs? With their deep history, curiosity, and expansive breadth of imagination, the humanities uniquely ensure our best chances of creative thought, cultural growth, and meaningful survival. 🐟



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Signaling Meaning in Italian Late Medieval Painting (1997).