

PERCEPTIONS AND REPRESENTATIONS OF CHIAROSCURO IN THE WESTERN PAINTINGS FROM THE THIRTEENTH TO EIGHTEENTH CENTURIES

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Introduction

This paper attempts to understand both the perceptions and representations of chiaroscuro as depicted in the western paintings from the thirteenth to eighteenth centuries. It looks into these constructs by means of studying the broad history of chiaroscuro along with analysing a selected number of historical paintings which may help identify a clear basis

to draw comparisons. Referring to the four types of chiaroscuro, this historical understanding focuses on the effects of both the light and dark in three-dimensional illusionism technique and representational figure paintings in relation to three different eras. In this regard, the analysis and comparison derived from both observation and Visual Analysis methods,

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several new findings related to chiaroscuro have been identified, and therefore concluded as a principal characteristic of Western art paintings.

Chiaroscuro

One of the various concepts of art theory which is often associated with the action of light and dark is 'chiaroscuro'. In other words, such concepts address the organization of light and shade. Notably, the word is of Italian origin: Chiaro (light - clarity) and Oscuro (darkness - obscurity). In this regard, Chiaroscuro generally refers to the graduating tones, from light to dark, in works of art, and the artists' skills in employing such a technique to represent volume and instigate mood. Chiaroscuro has over the years been used to imply form in relation to a light source in the art of many civilizations, but it shot to prominence only in the sixteenth century in Italy in the Western art (Civardi, 2005).

It was Leonardo da Vinci who reportedly introduced chiaroscuro, which can be interpreted as an organizational light and dark system in order to create a three-dimensional effect on a two-dimensional surface. Chiaroscuro is a product of the development and understanding of light and dark which were pioneered in the previous era. Artists such as Giotto and Masaccio have attempted to employ similar techniques, but the use of fresco or tempera appeared to have limited their exploration of light and dark in paint works. It has to be noted that by means of oil paint, it was possible for Leonardo to increase the tonal range in painting from very dark to very light. At the same time, it was also possible to create more subtle effects as the oil paint may take a relatively longer time to dry than the tempera or fresco. Leonardo also introduced sfumato, a technique that blurs or softens the edges of the areas of shadow and gives them a smoky, tonally diffuse quality.



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