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Author	平塚, 裕子(Hiratsuka, Yuko)
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Interpretation of Art from Diversified Viewpoints with an “Artwork First” Lens of Observation and Intuition: Placing the Artwork itself as the Center

A look at the work of a world-renowned scholar of the art of the Italian Renaissance

The history of art during the period of the Renaissance, a time of immense social change, has a long and rich tradition in academic literature both from within Italy and throughout the Western countries. Associate Professor Araki has entered this well-trodden territory with brand new ideas and has already received high praise from other experts for her achievements and for her doctoral thesis that she submitted to the Sapienza University of Rome. We asked Araki about her methodology, which she describes as being “artwork first.”

Awarded the Premio Daria Borghese, a prestigious prize for outstanding works on Rome

In February of 2022 with the COVID-19 pandemic still raging, Araki woke up to an email from Italy in her inbox. Still groggy and thinking it was spam, she was about to delete it when she read, “Your work has been nominated for the Premio Daria Borghese. Should you be selected

for this prize, would you be available to attend the award ceremony in Rome this May?”

The Premio Daria Borghese, first awarded in 1965, is a prestigious prize for works on Rome carried out by international scholars. In the star-studded list of scholars who have received this honor, Araki is still at the beginning of her career and is the first person from an Asian country to ever be awarded this prize.

Araki was nominated for the book *Le Cappelle Bufalini e Carafa*, a collection of her achievements including studies from her doctoral thesis that she submitted at the Sapienza University of Rome. The book was published by Campisano Editore in 2019. Araki still does not know who nominated her for this award, but she suspects that the presence of her book in library collections around the world at prestigious universities, research centers and institutes worked in her favor.

A new insight into 15th-century chapel frescoes

Araki traveled across Italy while she was staying in Rome in order to see the various mural paintings decorating the churches and cathedrals. She described how as she pondered the paintings in these spaces—ones separated from the realm of everyday affairs—she began to feel as if they were speaking to her. The following are a few examples of Araki’s achievements, published in her aforementioned book.

1. Project to decorate the walls of the Sistine Chapel frescoes in the 15th century

The Sistine Chapel in the Vatican is best

known for its 16th-century masterpieces by the great master, Michelangelo, namely the fresco ceiling, centered on the *Genesis* and the *Final Judgement*, which covers the altar wall. However, not so many people recognize frescoes depicting the *Stories of Moses* and *Stories of Jesus* on the side walls of the chapel painted by the four influential painters of the 15th century. One of these artists invited by the Pope to paint the Sistine Chapel was Sandro Botticelli, a painter whose work remains popular amongst art lovers even in Japan. The generally accepted hypothesis on the chronological order of the production of the frescoes is that the four masters discussed the subjects and motifs that should be painted on the walls and how they should be depicted. Then they made “agreements” about working procedures and instructed their own groups of apprentices to produce the frescoes.

However, to challenge pieces of this conventional wisdom, Araki suggested that instead of all the apprentices working together on paintings one at a time under a master painter, it is possible that the masters worked on the *Stories of Jesus* while the apprentices were assigned to paint the *Stories of Moses*. She also pointed out that Botticelli’s paintings work as an antithesis to those of Pietro Perugino, one of the other masters assigned to the Sistine Chapel. Extreme human poses, which Botticelli depicted, and his dynamic style illustrate the challenge presented at the time for the master painters to express their individuality while still remaining within the constraints of their “agreements.” Few art historians had broached the topic of how the frescoes demonstrated competing attitudes during the construction of the Sistine Chapel in the 15th century, and Araki’s hypothesis quickly gained recognition in the field.

2. Frescoes in the Bufalini Chapel and the Carafa Chapel

After the completion of the Sistine frescoes, Pinturicchio, one of Perugino’s apprentices went on to decorate the walls of the Bufalini Chapel. Shortly thereafter Filippino Lippi, one of Botticelli’s



Fig.1
Award ceremony for the Premio Daria Borghese
In May 2022, Araki received her prize at the Palazzo Borghese while surrounded by the teachers and friends who had helped her get there.



Fig.2 The Carafa Chapel (left) and its altarpiece, The Annunciation (right)

This painting depicts the person who commissioned it (the kneeling man with a red cloak) being blessed by the Virgin Mary (center). Araki explained the reason for this unique iconography in her research, discussing how the church of Santa Maria sopra Minerva where the Carafa Chapel is located had a special belief system that it had fostered related to the Virgin of the Annunciation. The Japanese video below provides a detailed analysis of this topic.



10-Minute Lecture to Build Academic Skills:
Learning Art History
<https://youtu.be/wDhgEuGxJpo?si=oy-D4besX8la7sfb>



Fig.3 Marbled art

First, dissolve the detergent glue in water to create a marbling solution. Next, sprinkle paints of your desired colors onto the surface of the solution. Then, dip a piece of paper into the solution, and the marbled pattern on the surface of the liquid is transferred to the paper. You have some control over which colors to use and how to pour the paint to some extent, but the final result is always a mystery just waiting to be revealed.

apprentices was commissioned to paint the Carafa Chapel. Araki noticed that the frescoes were strikingly similar and decided to investigate why. Through an in-depth comparison of the two frescoes, she suggested that Filippino had wholly referred to the Bufalini Chapel when he painted the Carafa Chapel. She also delved into the cultural background that informed the visual analogies between the chapels, and she discovered that this fact reflected the competition between the two rival mendicant orders in power in Italy at the time, the Franciscans and the Dominicans. Other scholars praised Araki's scholarship for being the first to identify this aspect of the relationship between these two chapels.

The "artwork first" approach that listens for a piece's intended message

Araki begins her research first and foremost by engaging with the artwork in question. The artwork is the "main character" of her research, and her role is to listen to what it is saying, leaving aside as many preconceptions as possible while making her observations.

From this starting point, she will begin to apply multiple methodologies appropriate to the artwork currently being discussed from stylistic analysis to iconographic interpretation, to the examination of the historical context. Through these processes, the way in which people at the time accepted and perceived the glorious Renaissance

frescoes, and the whole "picture" of them, will be revealed.

For example, Araki discovered vital information that would become a central piece of evidence in explaining the unique iconography of the *Annunciation* (Fig. 2) in the Carafa Chapel through a detailed analysis of the eulogy delivered at the funeral of the client who commissioned the artworks in that very chapel. Araki says that deciphering the interpersonal events of people who lived over 500 years ago is almost like a journey through time and space, or "like a detective novel. It's hard not to get excited."

Art historiography is overflowing with "classics" and established norms that have accumulated over time, making it an incredibly difficult and delicate process for scholars even in the West to propose new theories. Araki, however, has not been bound by these established theories, able to shed light on blind spots in our understanding of history and uncover new facts and ideas one after the another. Araki had this to say, "In some areas, it actually works in my favor to be Japanese, because I have such a different cultural background."

Sharing how to think artistically

Every piece of art has its own light that makes it shine. Araki says that she wants to be "an 'evangelist' who can help more people appreciate the appeal of various works of art." In recent years, she has become increasingly busy, juggling multiple research topics to accommodate

incoming requests for writing and collaborative research. At the same time, she is still fully engaged in her personal research and preparation for her single-authored book in Japan. Araki firmly believes that "artworks won't let you down." This is because she believes that if you ask hard enough, they will give you the answers you seek. Araki tells her students that art will support them at various junctures in their lives.

Ultimately, Araki's research approach itself, the effort to "listen absolutely to the voice of a work of art," has an intrinsic artistic aspect. In trying to figure out how to share this way of thinking with her students, Araki came up with the idea of using "marbling" (Fig. 3). This artistic technique can be enjoyable not only for college students but also for children and adults. By using this technique in workshops or similar settings, participants can create pieces based on a common theme, such as "going for a walk" or "impressionism." Visualizing the piece and trying to give it form provides the spark for artistic thinking. Then, by sharing their thought processes with other participants, they can expand on their initial ideas and conceptions.

Araki smiled brightly as she said, "I feel like I am good at drawing out people's feelings and making them think." Perhaps, with her well-honed observational skills that she has applied to art, she can also listen to the voices of people as well and help them express their individuality and potential.

(Interview and text writer: Yuko Hiratsuka)