

MASACCIO & THE ORATOR: LANDINO'S ORNATO IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

JEFFREY RUDA

Professor, Art History Program

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A key term in the first modern art criticism is ornato. Unlike our recent idea of ornament, it can refer to anything beyond the minimum needs of subject matter and depiction. Its fundamental text is the humanist Cristoforo Landino's account of Florentine artists in the Proemio to his 1481 commentary on Dante.

Landino described Masaccio, the foremost painter of the early Renaissance, as "puro senza ornato," pure without adornment. Landino's statement has long been esteemed both as accurate, and as an original insight that marks the beginnings of art criticism. I disagree with both views. Masaccio's art is ornato in most fifteenth-century meanings of the word, and we misunderstand his historical role to think otherwise. Landino's use of the term in this passage is so at odds with how he used it in his literary criticism that it is probably not his idea. Rather, it may record the emergence of a primitive, incoherent, but lively oral vocabulary of art criticism in the mid-fifteenth century. The relationship between humanist literary criticism and art criticism needs to be reconsidered.

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Light refreshments will be served. All are welcome.