PHILOSOPHY

IDEALISM is a philosophical movement which is most closely associated with Plato (Classical Greek, 480-323 BCE). Plato divided the universe into two spheres: the realm of UNIVERSELS (ideas) and the realm of PARTICULARS (things). He believed that ideas have actual existence, independent of the objects with which they are associated. He believed that the only true path to the understanding of the universe was through thought, especially through mathematics. Art during Idealistic periods tends to represent idealized persons and lofty themes.

RATIONALISM is a philosophical movement which is most closely associated with Aristotle (Classical Greek, 480-323 BCE). Aristotle was a student of Plato and became his most important critic, as his philosophy stressed the importance of observation and experience on the acquisition of truth. Aristotle became the earliest proponent of the scientific tradition in western culture. Art during rationalistic periods tends to be naturalistic.

HUMANISM is the third philosophy associated with the Classical Greek period (480-323 BCE). Humanism places an emphasis on human beings; their accomplishments, wants, needs, etc. The Humanism of the Greeks was a very lofty ideal and did not extend, in any practical sense to the general population, nearly half of whom were slaves.

THEOLOGY is the philosophy of religion. In this course we will study many works of art which relate to the Christian religion. The following are the major Christian theologians whose ideas influenced these works of art.

St. Augustine St. Augustine’s theology was influenced by Plato’s IDEALISM and DUALISM. It stressed the idea of original sin and the central importance of faith as the path to salvation which was seen as a gift from God. DUALISM, which separated all things into two spheres (Plato’s Universals vs Particulars) and saw the one as good and the other as evil. Other dualistic pairs were: soul and body, light and dark, heaven and hell. Art during the Early Christian and Medieval periods (313-1150 BCE) was very stylized and unnaturalistic, especially with respect to the human body, which was considered to be evil.

St. Thomas Aquinas The theology of Thomas Aquinas (which originated during the Gothic period and remains the official doctrine of the Roman Catholic church) made an appeal to the philosophy of Aristotle. His most important work was the Summa Theologica in which he proposed five proofs of the existence of God from observations of nature. Once Aquinas proved the existence of God through nature, it could no longer be evil (including the human body) and naturalism returned in Western art.

St. Francis of Assisi The influence of Francis’ ideas can be seen in art during the Gothic period (1150-1450). Francis told his followers that to serve God they should serve their fellow man. This emphasis on humanity, called HUMANITARIANISM, lead to a greater individuality in portraiture and set the stage for the return of Humanism during the Renaissance.

Martin Luther In 1517 Martin Luther nailed 95 protests to the door of Whittenberg Cathedral beginning the REFORMATION. His followers became known as PROTESTANTS and eventually formed a new branch of Christianity which reverted to the theology of St. Augustine with its emphasis on salvation through faith and dualism. The Protestant churches were very austere and devoid of decoration and artistic commissions nearly ceased.
**NEO-PLATONISM** with HUMANISM, formed the philosophical base for the Renaissance in Italy (1400-1525). Neo-Platonism fused Greek Mythology, Greek Philosophy and Christian Theology into one great body of revealed truth from God. In addition to the tradition of finding precursors in the Old Testament for New Testament events and personages, the Neo-Platonists found similar equivalents in ancient mythology and philosophy. In this manner, Christ becomes associated with the sun god Apollo and the Virgin Mary is equated with the Celestial Venus.

**EPISTEMOLOGY** is the philosophy which deals with KNOWLEDGE; its nature and acquisition. This philosophical discipline becomes important during the Neoclassical period (1750-1800) during another revival of Humanism. Its primary advocates were: Descartes, a Platonist, who believed in innate ideas and that mathematical truth was the only reliable path to knowledge. Locke, a follower of Aristotle, who believed that all knowledge came through experience, either through the senses or reflection upon experience. Kant who thought that the human mind had a structure which gave form to experience and was, in fact he “lawgiver of nature”.

**PANTHEISM** was a philosophical movement which found God in the “sublime” natural universe. It was important during the Romantic period (1800-1850) and inspired the landscape painters Constable, Turner and Cole.

**EXISTENTIALISM** was the first atheistic philosophy in Western thought. It stated that man was in a state of anxiety due to the complete lack of purpose to his life and the absolute responsibility of his “free will”. When pared with the implications of uncertainty in Quantum Mechanics, it influenced the Abstract Expressionists like Jackson Pollock.