

THE INQUIRING EYE

EUROPEAN RENAISSANCE ART



NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART, WASHINGTON

THE INQUIRING EYE

EUROPEAN RENAISSANCE ART

Goals

Introduce the Renaissance in Italy and northern Europe during the 15th and 16th centuries.

Explain the historical and cultural context for the period in which this art was created.

Suggest discussion questions and teaching activities that can be adapted by the teacher to the interests and levels of students.

Components

The Renaissance at a Glance: key ideas and issues summarized.

The Renaissance in Europe: background and historical information on the development of the Renaissance in Europe and profiles on important artists.

Art in Context: information on the art objects reproduced in slides and color prints. (Note: Some of these images present nudity. Teachers should consult school policy on the presentation of such materials in the classroom.) Dimensions of all objects referred to throughout text are in inches.

General Discussion and Activities: teaching suggestions for classroom use.

Art Techniques: materials and methods used by Renaissance artists.

Glossary of Terms: definitions of vocabulary words throughout text in **bold** type.

Bibliography: additional resources for teacher and students.

Slides and Reproductions: National Gallery of Art paintings, sculpture, and decorative arts.

Timeline: presenting important people and events in European Renaissance history.

Additional Resources

Extension Programs (films, videocassettes, teaching packets, color slide program, and video discs) are available from the National Gallery of Art on a free-loan basis. A free catalogue, listing all current programs and describing procedures for ordering materials, may be obtained by writing to the Department of Education Resources, Extension Programs Section, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. 20785.

Acknowledgments

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Cover:
Raphael
The Alba Madonna
c. 1510
National Gallery of Art
Andrew W. Mellon
Collection

Flyleaf:
Follower of the Master
of the Playing Cards
*Vine Ornament with
Two Birds*
c. 1440-1450, engraving
National Gallery of Art

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THE RENAISSANCE AT A GLANCE



he Renaissance had its origins in the fourteenth century, as cities began to grow into major centers of commerce and a feudal society was transformed into one with a market-based economy. While this trend was slowed by the devastating Black Death at mid-century, the prestige and wealth of a new middle class became an economic and social force by 1400. Merchant and banking families such as the Medici of Italy vied for power with popes and princes. This new urban aristocracy determined the course of culture and politics through the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

Renaissance Humanism

The guiding force of this historical period was the revival of interest in classical culture; hence, the name “Renaissance,” or “rebirth.” Humanist writers studied ancient Greek and Latin manuscripts to uncover classical ideals. Just as the ancients recognized the essential dignity and rational intelligence of man, so Renaissance philosophers focused their attention on the individual’s capabilities and human values. The belief that secular studies (what we today call “the humanities”) are as worthy a pursuit as the study of Christian theology distinguishes this period from the Middle Ages.

The Spirit of Inquiry

A growing interest in all aspects of life led to wide-ranging investigations of the natural world, opening up new fields of endeavor: geography, physics, mathematics, anatomy, biology, and mechanical invention. Discoveries in the realm of science greatly influenced developments in art, as painters and sculptors utilized the knowledge of anatomy, mathematical perspective, and optics to create a convincing and realistic view of nature and the human figure in art.

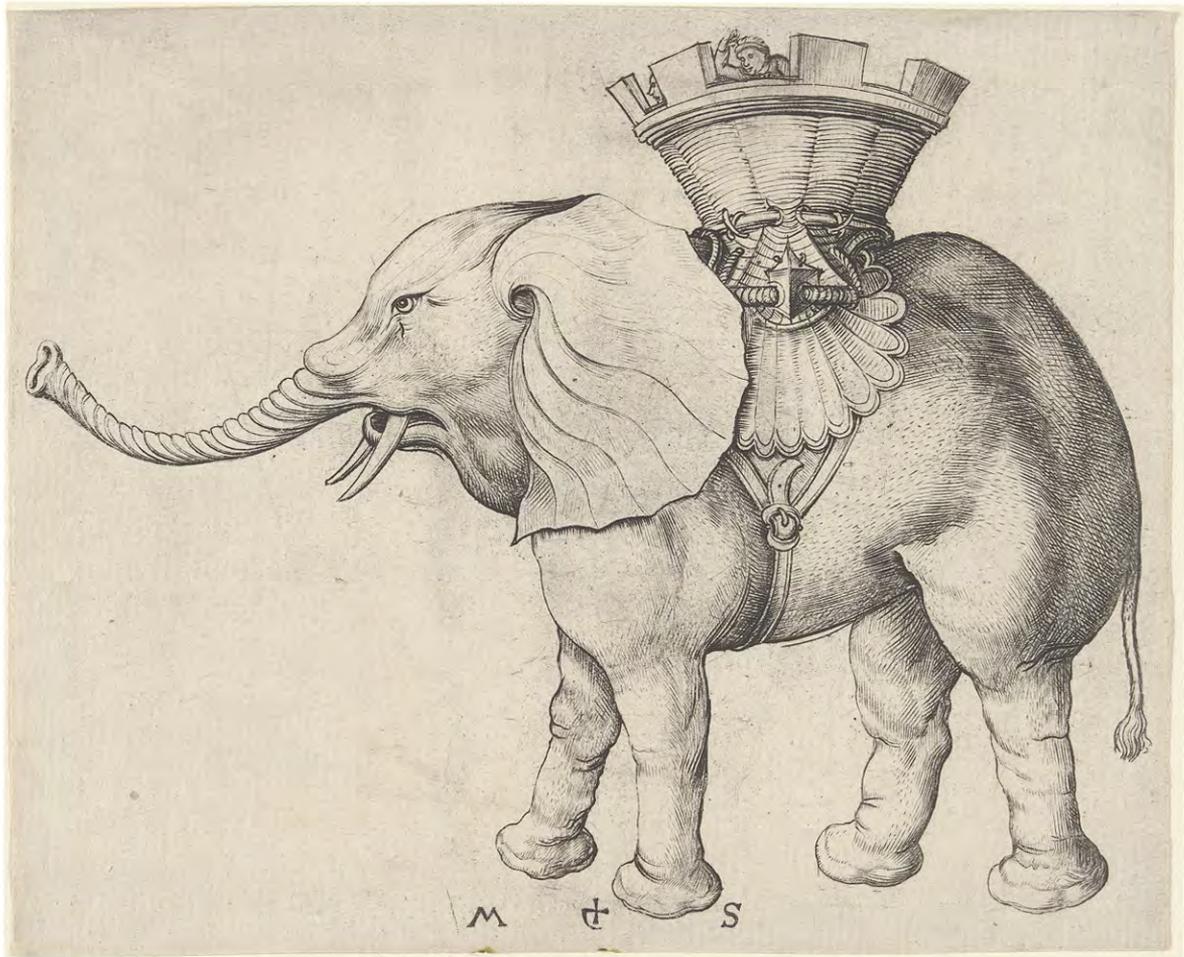
Artists and Patrons

While the Church continued to commission great **altarpieces** and other forms of ecclesiastical art, a new type of patronage arose among prosperous merchants, guilds, and princes. Art began to focus on more worldly concerns, glorifying the wealth and power of rulers and merchant princes and also reflecting the new interest in classical learning. The status of the artist also changed dramatically. Previously viewed as an anonymous craftsman, by the end of the Renaissance the artist was hailed for his unique gifts and, in the case of towering figures like Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo, regarded as a genius.

Opposite:
Raphael
*Saint George and
the Dragon*
c. 1506
National Gallery of Art
Andrew Mellon
Collection

*The Renaissance
and Reformation
in the North*

In the early fifteenth century the art and culture of northern Europe also witnessed a renewed interest in mankind and the physical world. The power of the Church declined, and more authority was concentrated in the hands of powerful rulers and the urban middle class. The Valois dynasty in France set the tone for the elaborate court life that was to influence many parts of Europe. In Germany artists such as Albrecht Dürer made significant contributions to printmaking. In the early sixteenth century the Reformation, initiated by Martin Luther, caused profound changes not only in the Church but also in art.

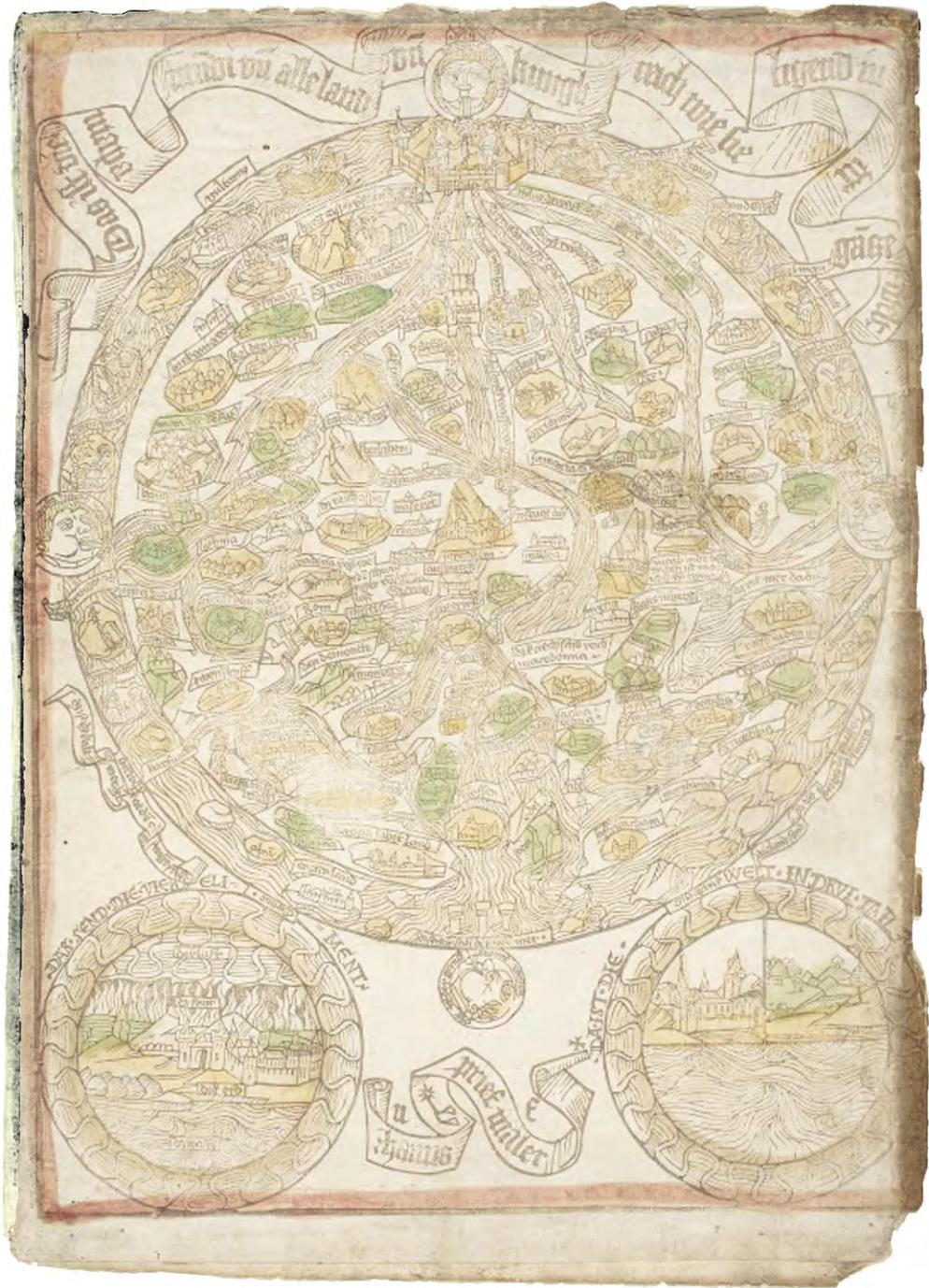


Opposite:
 Martin Schongauer
The Elephant
 c. 1480-1490, engraving
 National Gallery of Art
 Rosenwald Collection

It is recorded that in 1483 city officials gave permission to admit a Hans Filshover and his "helffandt" into Frankfurt. Schongauer may have seen this elephant on his way to Augsburg.

Right:
The Map of the World
 Augsburg (?)
 c. 1480, woodcut
 National Gallery of Art
 Rosenwald Collection

This map has placed the Garden of Eden at the top; at the bottom, to the left of where three columns mark the Straits of Gibraltar, is the island of England! The two smaller circles contain the four elements and the three parts of city, country, and sea.





ΙΜΑΓΟ· ΕΡΑΣΜΙ· ΡΟΤΕΡΟΔΑ-
ΜΙ· ΑΒ· ΑΛΒΕΡΤΟ· ΔΥΡΕΡΟ· ΑΔ
VIVAM· ΕΦΦΙΓΙΕΜ· ΔΕΛΙΝΙΑΤΑ·

ΤΗΝ· ΚΡΕΙΤΤΟ· ΤΑ· ΣΥΓΓΡΑΜ-
ΜΑΤΑ· ΜΕ· ΕΙ

· Μ Δ Χ Χ V Ι ·

Α

*“The world is coming to its senses
as if awakening from a deep sleep.”—Erasmus*

THE RENAISSANCE IN EUROPE



he fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries saw western Europe undergoing dramatic changes. Political and religious upheavals were accompanied by massive social changes, radical shifts in the economy, and revolutionary ideas in the arts and sciences. Although these changes did not affect every part of Europe at the same time nor with the same intensity, by the close of the sixteenth century a new culture had clearly evolved. The excitement about this new modern era, as expressed by the sixteenth-century Dutch scholar Erasmus, was shared by many people who lived in the time of the Renaissance.

The term “Renaissance,” from the French verb *renaître*, means “rebirth,” with particular emphasis on the revival of classical learning and culture during this period. Although such a revival did occur quite markedly in Italy during the fifteenth century, it was not until the next century that northern Europe paid significant attention. Throughout all parts of Europe there was much that was still medieval during these centuries we have labeled “the Renaissance.”

Yet if we broaden the term to include a rebirth of interest in mankind and the physical world, then such a change did occur throughout much of western Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Certain aspects of this change can be perceived as early as the thirteenth century when the spiritually centered world of the Middle Ages began to lose its dominance over the lives of many people. A variety of factors contributed to this change: renewed contact with the world beyond narrow national boundaries and consequent alterations in economic life, developments in religious and philosophical outlook, and higher levels of literacy and learning. This rebirth or renaissance, in which “man was the measure of all things,” influenced every aspect of life, including the visual arts. The same qualities of self-confidence and individualism manifested in those pursuits also helped make the Renaissance the great age of exploration. Between 1475 and 1600, much of the uncharted world was discovered.

Opposite:
Albrecht Dürer
Erasmus of Rotterdam
1526, engraving
National Gallery of Art
Rosenwald Collection

*The Church in
an Era of Change*

In the medieval period, the concerns of the European population had centered on the all-embracing life within the Christian church and the hope for salvation. Power, both secular and spiritual, rested in the papacy in Rome. Reinforcing the power of the Church was its great wealth, which included holdings substantial enough to make it the largest property owner in many regions. Much of the education was conducted by the clergy, and art was largely religious in nature, commissioned by the Church.

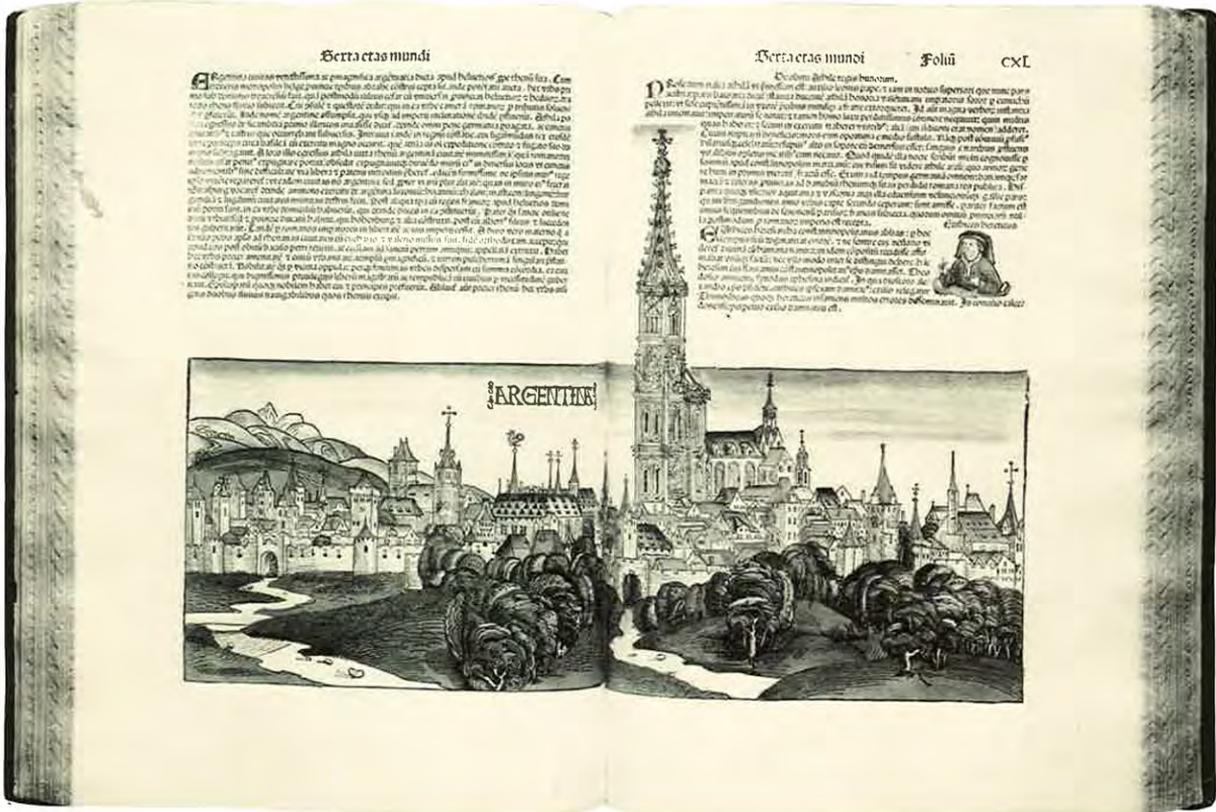
The enormous power of the Church and the abuses of that power led to periodic attempts at reform and renewal throughout the medieval period. Of great importance were the religious orders founded in the thirteenth century, such as the Franciscans and the Dominicans. Saint Francis, in particular, imparted a humanizing influence on religion with his emphasis on the beauty of the natural world and the value of human life. These views would prove to have a strong impact on Renaissance thought and culture.

The pervasive control of the Church over secular affairs was further weakened in the fourteenth century. From 1309 to 1377, the papacy was headquartered in Avignon, France, not in Rome. French interests helped to elect French popes, and this blatant political maneuvering undermined the prestige of the papacy. Further damage was inflicted during the period known as the Great Schism (1378-1424), when rival factions of cardinals, unable to reach a compromise, elected two popes. Church unity, which had been absolute in the earlier Middle Ages, was irrevocably harmed.

*The Growth of
Towns and the
Rise of the
Merchant Class*

In the fourteenth century, proud towns and city-states were becoming centers of commerce and power, replacing in importance the great fiefdoms of the old aristocracy. With the rise of trade and commerce, and spurred on by the growth of a new merchant class, the agrarian economy of the Middle Ages was slowly being transformed into one based on capital. Alongside the feudal lords who ruled the countryside and the wealthy monastic orders, an urban middle class arose: bankers and grain merchants, weavers and clothmakers, a growing number of affluent tradesmen living in the cities. The wealthiest of these merchants became a new aristocracy.

The textile industry, in particular, was a boon to the economy of Europe. Aristocratic princes and court ladies acquired a taste for elaborate fashion, inspired by silk and other rare fabrics from the East. With textiles in great demand for clothing as well as décor, the merchants involved in this lucrative market soon became wealthy. Bruges and Ghent became important centers of clothmaking; Florence prospered by concentrating on dyeing and finishing the cloth made in northern Europe.



Left:
 German, *Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata*
 c. 1480, hand-colored woodcut
 National Gallery of Art
 Rosenwald Collection

Above:
 View of Strassburg from
 Hartmann Schedel,
Liber Chronicarum
 (Nuremberg Chronicle)
 Nuremberg, 1493

bound volume with
 1,809 hand-colored
 woodcuts
 National Gallery of Art
 Gift of Paul Mellon

The *Nuremberg Chronicle* is the largest printed illustrated book of the fifteenth century. Strassburg is shown here with its famous Gothic cathedral in the center of the city.

Beginning in the thirteenth century, workers engaged in various skilled trades and occupations had organized themselves into guilds, not unlike the trade unions of today. These organizations determined the regulations for their particular line of work and grew to be of vital importance to the economy and life of the cities. In Florence and many other places, the guilds were major patrons of the arts.

The Rise of the Artist in Society

In the Middle Ages artists were members of guilds but did not yet have their own organizations. In the North painters might be grouped with saddlemakers, for they often painted leatherwork; in Italy, with doctors and pharmacists from whom they bought supplies; sculptors usually belonged to the carpenters' or stoneworkers' guilds. By the fourteenth century, painters in Florence and in the North had their own guild dedicated to Saint Luke, who, according to legend, was the first Christian painter. The guild became a powerful artistic force, controlling contracts and commissions in each locale and determining who would be admitted to the painting profession. Before gaining admission to a guild, the artist had to meet specific standards of proficiency that deemed him a master of his craft. It was as apprentices to master painters, not in formal art schools, that young artists learned their occupation.

At the beginning of the Renaissance, painters and sculptors functioned as craftsmen, creating objects largely for commercial use. Workshops were as likely to produce banners, festival decorations, emblems, and ceremonial shields as they were paintings. Little distinction was made between "fine" and "decorative" art. As the Renaissance progressed, artists increasingly came to be distinguished from other manual laborers. Painters became known for an individual style and won praise for their technical skill as well as their knowledge and imagination. This rise in status reflects the dramatic changes taking place in society at that time. The new value placed on the individual and the nobility of individual achievement marks the shift from medieval to Renaissance culture.

Rebirth of the Arts

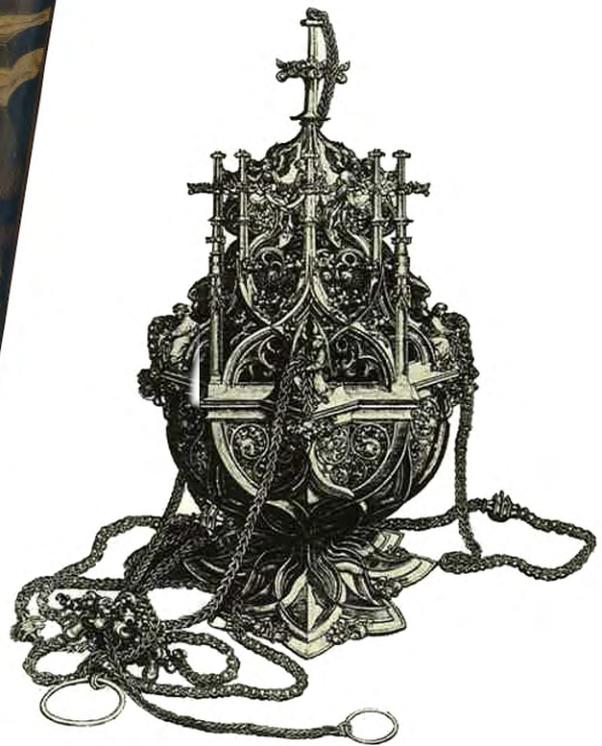
The great biographer of Renaissance artists, Giorgio Vasari, wrote of "the arts reborn" in praising the work of the early fourteenth-century Florentine painter Giotto di Bondone. Vasari was writing from the perspective of the sixteenth century, but even Giotto's contemporaries knew that they were viewing a revolutionary new style of painting. Gone was the otherworldly manner of the **Byzantine** style with its flatness and rigidly compartmentalized figures; in its place were figures drawn from nature, based on close observation of the real world, all rendered in glowing color.

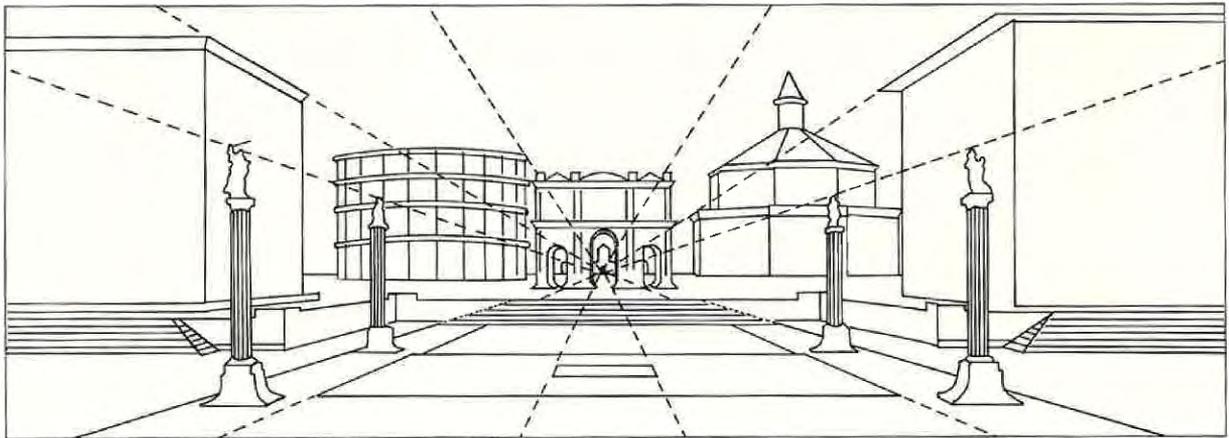


Left:
Andrea del Castagno
The Youthful David
c. 1450
National Gallery of Art
Widener Collection

Below:
Martin Schongauer
A Censer
c. 1480–1490, engraving
National Gallery of Art
Rosenwald Collection

A censer is used for burning incense in a church. This engraving may have been a model for goldsmiths, or Schongauer may have executed this beautiful image just for pleasure.





Central Italian Artist
*Ideal City with a
Fountain and Statues
of the Virtues*
c. 1500
Walters Art Gallery
Baltimore

Giotto's innovations were to set in motion the great achievements of the Renaissance, but it would be another century before a group of Florentine artists made any significant headway in this direction. By the early fifteenth century, artists had begun to study the human body in an effort to create more lifelike figures. A new interest in classical antiquity revealed to them the heroic dimensions of Greek and Roman sculpture, which influenced the work of sculptors as well as painters. At the same time, artists were bringing the contemporary world into their work, placing their subjects, even in religious paintings, in familiar landscapes and domestic settings. A theme like the Adoration of the Magi could reveal as much about Epiphany celebrations in Florence as it did about the holy event described in the Bible.

Of paramount importance was the invention of one-point perspective. Even in antiquity some painters had mastered the ability to create an illusion of depth in their work, although they lacked an understanding of the mathematical laws by which objects appear smaller as they recede into the distance. Filippo Brunelleschi, architect of the great dome of the Cathedral of Florence in the early fifteenth century, has been credited with providing mathematical formulations for solving this problem. However, it was Leon Battista Alberti, a generation later, whose treatise on painting—*De Pictura*, published in 1435—offered a theory of **linear perspective**. Artists now had a measured procedure for carrying out a systematic ordering of space on a painted surface. Embodying the rationalism of Renaissance culture as a whole, Alberti's theory was a major contribution to the development of a convincing realism in the art of the Renaissance and of following centuries.

As the Renaissance spread throughout western Europe, artists of the North also made significant contributions, notably in the development of oil painting. The invention of this medium was once attributed to the fifteenth-century Flemish painter Jan van Eyck. Although this was not the case, he did introduce techniques for handling oil paint in order to achieve rich surface effects. In this medium oil rather than the traditional egg yolk of tempera paint is mixed with color, or pigment. Oil paint dries much more slowly than tempera, allowing the artist to correct mistakes, depict things in greater detail, and achieve richer colors and more luminous surfaces. Oil paint is layered with a series of transparent **glazes**, which make the tiny brushstrokes become imperceptible and create a hard, enamel-like finish.

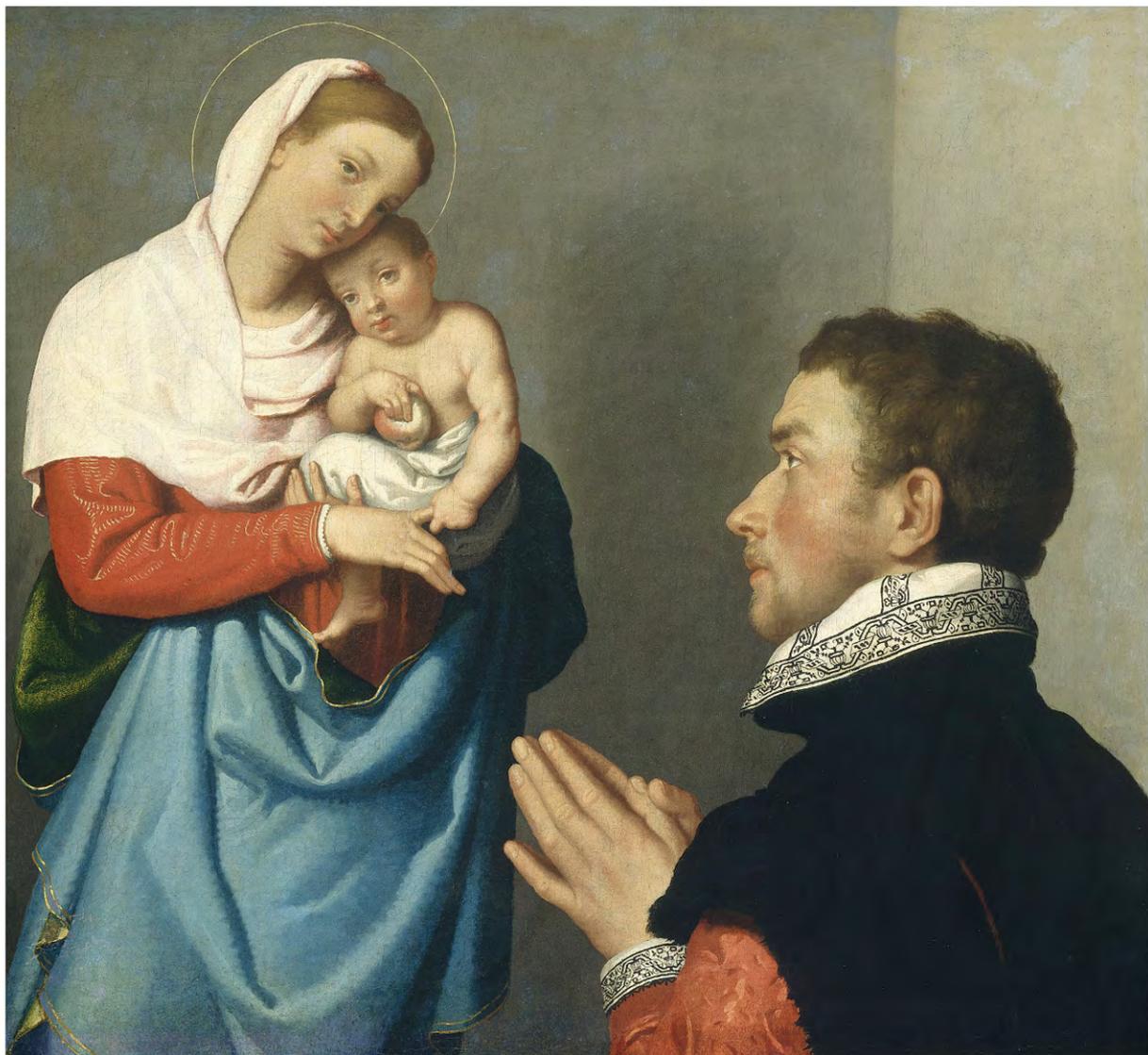
*Renaissance
Patronage*

Northern artists were not eager to share their discoveries with their Italian colleagues, but their secrecy was of no avail. By the sixteenth century the Venetian artist Titian had achieved a mastery of oil painting that enabled him to create works of unparalleled coloristic richness. In succeeding centuries oil painting would become the fundamental medium for artists.

In Italy during the first two decades of the sixteenth century—the period known as the High Renaissance—all the explorations and achievements of artists since Giotto came to fruition. In the work of Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael, and Michelangelo, harmony and balance were achieved within the framework of classical realism.

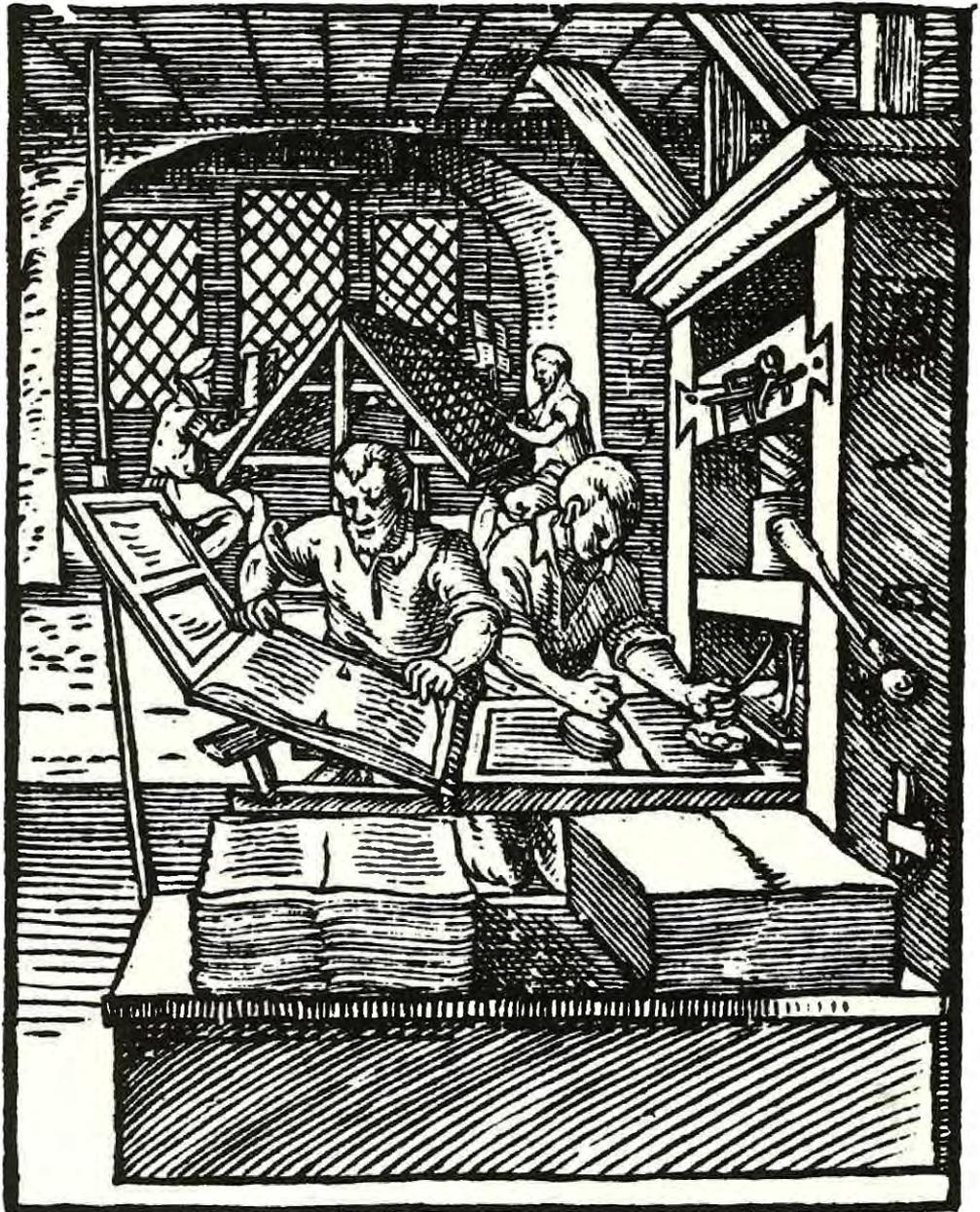
Although the Church continued to be a major patron of the arts, new kinds of patronage developed in Renaissance society. Wealthy middle-class merchants began to commission work and to support local artists. In addition to satisfying their desire for the luxurious trappings of the aristocracy, the acquisition of art enabled these merchants to gain prestige in the eyes of the world. They commissioned portraits of themselves and their families, as well as paintings in which they were depicted as participants in a religious scene. The panels by Petrus Christus of a donor and his wife, which originally served as the wings of an altarpiece, are representative of this type of commission. In bestowing commissions, many wealthy merchants also had an eye on the hereafter. The Church frowned on some of their business practices, which led many people to fear eternal damnation. They often sought to avoid this fate by leaving money to the Church for the poor as well as for the renovation of churches and the erection of private family chapels. Certainly, genuine philanthropy and an appreciation of the arts were also reasons for their patronage, but whatever the motivation, it provided work for many artists of the period. Cosimo de' Medici, for example, whose sumptuous lifestyle and splendid palace were the envy of many Florentines, gave money for the renovation of the San Marco monastery and the expansion of the basilica of San Lorenzo

Princely patrons, including the popes and prelates in Rome and the *doges* (dukes) in Venice, engaged the talents of painters and sculptors for their elaborate palaces, monuments, and festivals. The greater an artist's renown, the more competition there was to win his services. When Leonardo da Vinci went to work for Ludovico Sforza in Milan, he spent years planning an equestrian monument to the duke's father, Francesco, which was never completed. When Jan van Eyck worked for Duke Philip the Good of Burgundy, he also served as a diplomat and emissary to foreign courts. Artists, along with poets, scientists, musicians, and philosophers, would be "collected" by a prince to reside at court and promote the image of the reigning dynasty.



Giovanni Battista
Moroni
*A Gentleman in
Adoration before the
Madonna*
c. 1560
National Gallery of Art
Samuel H. Kress
Collection

An image of a sixteenth century print shop from
Hartmann Schopper
*Panoplia omnium
illiberalium mechanicarum ...*
1568
Walters Art Gallery
Baltimore



*Renaissance
Education*

As the Middle Ages waned, enlightened scholars and educators in both northern Europe and Italy instituted sweeping educational reforms. The new desire to prepare the younger generation for a life of virtue and public service reflected a fundamental change in education. Whereas in medieval times knowledge of the Bible was the goal of literacy, in the Renaissance people came to believe that a study of the humanities was the essential springboard to a virtuous life. In Italy Vittorino da Feltre and Guarino da Verona introduced curricula concentrating on the study of classical literature but also including instruction in moral values. They also incorporated athletics into their curricula, seeking a balanced program to develop the mind as well as the body. Their approach set a standard for education; eventually the students themselves became teachers and carried this broad-based humanist curriculum into the established universities of Italy and northern Europe.

*Technology and
the Invention of
the Printing Press*

The flowering of education and literacy in the Renaissance created a demand for reading materials that far outstripped the supply available. Manuscript copyists, laboriously transcribing by hand pages from the Bible or other texts, might take years to complete a project. Books were consequently precious and owned by few people.

Enterprising book producers sought new ways to copy texts and images more efficiently to meet the demands of the literate public. By the first half of the fifteenth century, blockbooks—with text and image cut out of a single block of wood and printed on paper—made simple texts available at low cost. About the same time procedures for printing engraved designs were developed in the shops of gold and silversmiths. These innovations facilitated the development of movable type and the first printing press by Johan Gutenberg in Germany by the middle of the fifteenth century. The development in that century of cheap, readily available paper—without which even the most advanced printing press would be useless—was a significant factor.

In less than fifty years after the introduction of movable type, 220 towns in western Europe boasted at least one printer. The era of mass communication had begun, affecting almost every facet of life. When the followers of Martin Luther used the print media to spread his reformist ideas throughout Europe, the western Christian church was changed forever. So revolutionary were the changes wrought by the invention of the printing press that many scholars regard it as the dividing line between the Middle Ages and the modern era.



“If then we are to call any age golden, it is beyond doubt that age which brings forth golden talents.... such is true of this our age.”— Marsilio Ficino

THE RENAISSANCE IN ITALY



n Renaissance Italy, many people, like the Florentine philosopher Marsilio Ficino, saw themselves as living in a special age, as being “reborn”—heirs to the glories of the ancient civilizations of Greece and Rome. Although there had been periodic revivals of classical forms in the Middle Ages, the interest in classical antiquity that resurfaced in Italy beginning in the fourteenth century was on all levels more intense, and the past was more thoroughly studied than ever before.

The Revival of Classical Antiquity

The classical revival of the Italian Renaissance was not simply an adaptation of certain motifs from antiquity but rather a new interpretation of classical thought and ideals. The classical world was perceived as a civilization devoted to the honor and dignity of man and the cultivation of human reason. This rational, humanistic spirit seized the imagination of scholars in Italy.

Initially the classical revival appeared in literature. Petrarch, the fourteenth-century poet and scholar, studied ancient manuscripts in order to revive a pure classical Latin. With the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453, many Greek scholars fled to Italy, which stimulated interest in learning Greek and studying ancient manuscripts.

Nowhere was the interest in classical antiquity more intense than among Italian architects, painters, and sculptors. Architects could study the ruins of the Roman Forum and read the rediscovered works of Vitruvius, the first-century A.D. Roman writer whose treatise *De Architectura* deeply influenced the classical revival. Classical art as well as literature fed the imagination of painters, who probed the mysteries of creating three-dimensional space and appropriated mythological themes for their work. During this era, when people were passionately committed to recapturing the former glory of Rome, these classical myths gained immense popularity among educated people.

Sculptors undertook a systematic study of Greek and Roman art that inspired them to create solid, well-proportioned figures projecting a new sense of the dignity of the individual. Michelangelo’s heroic figures reflect a keen awareness of ancient statues, which he encountered as a youth in Florence. The rediscovery of sculptures like the *Laocoön*, unearthed in Rome in 1506, provided noble models for other artists.

Marcantonio Raimondi
after Raphael
The Judgment of Paris
c. 1510/1511
engraving
National Gallery of Art
Gift of W. G. Russell
Allen

*Renaissance
Individualism*

The spirit of individualism that flourished in every aspect of Renaissance culture resonated with particular strength in Italy. Personifying that spirit was the fifteenth-century artist, architect, and theorist Leon Battista Alberti. In one of his essays he traced his own successful career, which embraced many different fields: “For, assiduous in the science and skill of dealing with arms and horses and musical instruments, as well as in the pursuit of letters and the fine arts, he was devoted to the knowledge of the most strange and difficult things. And finally he embraced with zeal and forethought everything which pertained to fame.” Alberti’s words describe what the modern world would call a “Renaissance man.” This individualistic attitude, the pursuit of fame, and the quest for personal achievement are significant aspects of Italian Renaissance society.

The fact that Alberti was not only an artist and an architect but also a writer of major treatises on art also denotes the enormous change that had taken place in the status of Renaissance artists. In contrast to medieval artisans, the Renaissance artist was usually literate and educated in the arts and sciences. By the sixteenth century, certain artists such as Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, and Raphael were associating with the educated elite, often as respected members of court circles.

*Renaissance
Florence*

As the birthplace of the Renaissance, the city of Florence has often been compared with Athens, the center of art in the ancient world. Both cities nurtured intense creativity while at the same time facing political instability and conflict. In the case of Florence, the first four decades of the fifteenth century, which coincided with the formative years of the early Renaissance, were turbulent times threatening the very existence of this city-state.

In 1402 the siege of Florence by the forces of the Duke of Milan, Giangaleazzo Visconti, posed the greatest political threat to its survival. Having conquered most of northern Italy, the Milanese army was about to swoop down on Florence when the plague struck, killing the duke and decimating his troops. Florence was saved, and the Florentines attributed their deliverance to divine intervention.

A good measure of courage, ingenuity, and business acumen also helped fortify the position of Florence. By the year 1400, the city had become the commercial and cultural center of Italy, with a population of over 100,000. Its merchants in wool and grain traded with cities throughout Europe; Florentine bankers controlled the flow of capital all over Italy and had branches of their firms throughout Europe.

Master of the E-Series
 Tarocchi
Philosofia (Philosophy)
Geometria (Geometry)
Theologia (Theology)
Musica (Music)
 c. 1465, engravings
 National Gallery of Art

These four images are part of a deck of fifty cards, once thought to be tarot cards.



The fortunes of Florence were intermingled with those of the Medici, a powerful banking family who held virtual control of the republic from the early 1430s to 1494. Although very few of the Medici ever held office, they retained power by manipulating elections and exerting the force of their vast wealth. These riches enabled them to build sumptuous palaces and to become major patrons of the arts. Important artists were commissioned to create works not only for their palaces but also for churches and public spaces in Florence. Under Lorenzo de' Medici (the Magnificent), who held power from 1469 to 1492, the city attained an unrivaled splendor.

More than other Italian cities, Florence paid homage to ancient Rome in its literature and art, its written histories and public monuments. The feelings of hope and confidence generated in Florence during the fifteenth century were unmatched by any other Italian city of the period. It was within this atmosphere of vitality and energy that young artists, including Brunelleschi, Masaccio, and Donatello, sought to create a new art. In doing so, they were following a trail blazed a century earlier by their fellow Florentine, Giotto. Reclaiming that legacy, they and succeeding generations of Florentine artists made an incomparable contribution to the art of the Western world.

Renaissance Venice

Second only to Florence in importance, Venice was the center of a powerful and magnificent republic ruled by an elected *doge* (duke). Since the ninth century, Venice had been trading with Constantinople, later extending its commercial links to the East and building a colonial empire that included Crete, Cyprus, and parts of northeastern Italy. The silks, spices, and other luxury goods enjoyed by Europeans were largely transported from Asia in Venetian ships.

Because this long-standing trade relationship tied it closely to the East, Venice developed an artistic tradition that was heavily influenced by the Byzantine style. In the first half of the fifteenth century Florentine artists began to arrive in Venice and to introduce artists there to the stylistic innovations of the Renaissance. Although the Venetian artists eagerly accepted a style of painting based on the accurate observation of the natural world, their work took on distinctive qualities that are perhaps indebted to the physical reality of this city floating on water. The eye could not help but be dazzled by the brilliant light reflected by the lagoons, nor could artists fail to notice how the sharp outlines of objects seemed to blur in the atmosphere of the lagoons so that colors blended together in a glowing light. For Venetian artists, color and light took precedence over form and mass. Color of a remarkable mellowness and richness became the primary means of unifying their compositions, whereas to achieve this Florentine painters depended on perspective, composition, and draftsmanship.



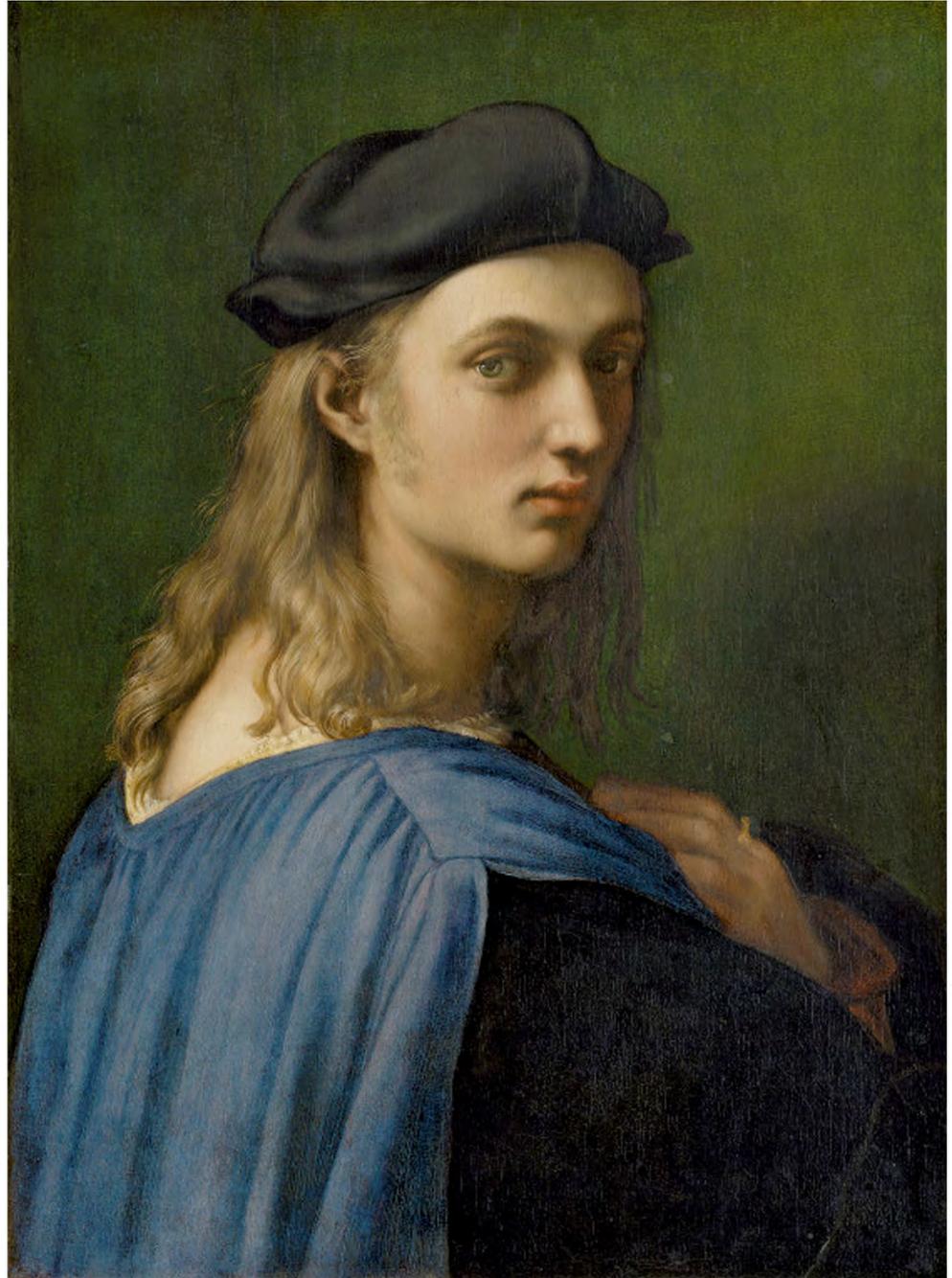
Above:
Jacopo Tintoretto
*Doge Alvise Mocenigo
and Family before the
Madonna and Child*
probably 1573
National Gallery of Art
Samuel H. Kress
Collection



Left: Manner of
Niccolò Fiorentino
Lorenzo de' Medici
c. 1485-1500
National Gallery of Art
Samuel H. Kress
Collection

Raphael
Bindo Altoviti
c. 1515
National Gallery of Art
Samuel H. Kress
Collection

Bindo Altoviti was a wealthy Roman banker and a friend of Raphael. He was about twenty-five years old at the time of this portrait.



Giovanni Bellini, the leading member of a family of painters, played a significant role in the development of Venetian art during his long career. Both Giorgione and Titian—the greatest of all Venetian painters—were his pupils. At the beginning of the sixteenth century their achievements and those of other artists led Venice to rival Florence as the major center of Italian painting.

Renaissance Rome

The Avignon papacy and the Great Schism in the fourteenth century had relegated Rome to the status of a provincial town lacking the cultural sophistication of Renaissance Florence. It was not until the late fifteenth century that humanist popes approached the task of rebuilding the city, and not until the accession of Julius II to the papacy in 1503 that these efforts were fully realized. Having restored the Papal States to the Church and undertaken an ambitious program of reform within the Church, Julius sought to commission works of art that would revive the grandeur of the ancient Roman Empire and thereby glorify his papacy.

In the mighty ambition of Julius II, the Roman period of the High Renaissance had its inception. The leading artists of the day came to work for him. The rebuilding of the Basilica of Saint Peter's was entrusted to the architect Bramante, whose grandiose plan (later altered) assumed monumental dimensions that called to mind the Pantheon of ancient Rome. In 1508 the pope summoned Michelangelo to Rome to paint the Sistine Chapel, a work of such genius that few have ever disputed the words of a Florentine official who told Julius that the artist "would achieve things which would amaze the whole world."

Michelangelo was at work on the Sistine Chapel ceiling when a young artist arrived in Rome, Raphael, who was destined to become one of the towering figures of the High Renaissance in all of Italy. Julius commissioned him to decorate various rooms in the Vatican, which are now known as the Raphael Stanze. His series of frescoes are renowned for the beauty and harmony of their design.

By 1520 the brilliant period known as the High Renaissance had come to an end. Its legacy in Rome was an art of majestic dimensions, possessing a grandeur that distinguished it from the earlier period of the High Renaissance in Florence. The strong impact of the achievements in Rome would influence succeeding generations of Italian artists.

Perhaps more than any other individual of the period, Leonardo da Vinci personifies the “Renaissance man”—gifted in many fields ranging from art to science and technology. His great abilities, handsome appearance, and exceptional conversation enabled him to reside at the courts of some of the most powerful leaders in Europe. Very early in his career he was recognized as one of the most talented painters of his generation, yet he left very few finished works in this medium. He preferred to apply his artistic talents to solving problems and recording his observations of the world around him.

Born in 1452 in the little town of Vinci, twenty miles outside of Florence, Leonardo trained in the busy Florentine studio of Andrea del Verrocchio during the early 1470s. The exact nature of their artistic collaboration remains a source of controversy, but critics have been able to detect in certain works from this shop the unique qualities that could only have come from the hand of the young Leonardo: a close observation of man and nature combined with painting of inestimable beauty.

Leonardo began receiving independent commissions in Florence by the mid-1470s, and by the beginning of the next decade had left Florence for the Milanese court of Ludovico Sforza. At the time Leonardo was in residence, the court of Ludovico and his wife, Beatrice d’Este, attained a brilliance matched by few others. Beatrice and her husband employed Leonardo for many different projects, ranging from great pageants and sculptural monuments to civil and military engineering works. Yet despite his numerous court duties, Leonardo found time to create one of the most memorable paintings of all time, *The Last Supper*, for Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan.

Leonardo advised other painters to paint “without using lines, insofar as that is possible.” When depicting a face, for example, he would not define the edge of an eye, the meeting of the lips, or the edge of a shadow with a precise line. He would instead accomplish this by a gradual change of color. The contours of the face, not bound by lines, would melt away at the edges. In his *Notebooks*, Leonardo wrote, “See that your shadows and lights blend like smoke without strokes or borders.” This technique, which came to be called **sfumato** (literally “smoky”), represented a radical break with traditional Florentine painting techniques, which relied on line to define forms. In avoiding line, Leonardo was able to achieve a more lifelike painting.

Unlike many Italian intellectuals, Leonardo was a true empiricist, believing in only what the eye could see. This scientific detachment allowed him to make original contributions not only in the visual arts but also in engineering, aerodynamics, anatomy, and other fields. Thousands of pages of his notes and drawings survive,

but they were never organized into any coherent order and most were unpublished until the modern era. Thus many of the advanced observations remained unknown to his contemporaries; some had to await rediscovery centuries later.

Leonardo appears to have formed few close attachments to people, nor did he adhere to any particular religious beliefs or philosophy; even the classical authors then held in high esteem get scant mention from his active pen. Yet it was this very quality that enabled him to become a dispassionate observer. Unhindered by preconceived notions, he was able to train his eye to observe and record phenomena that few, if any, had observed before.

After a long sojourn in Milan, which lasted until 1499, Leonardo led a peripatetic existence that took him to Mantua, Venice, Florence, and Rome, where he resided at the court of Pope Leo X. He painted very little in the last ten years of life, preferring to concentrate on his scientific work. Two years before his death he accepted an invitation to join the court of Francis I, King of France. When he died in France in 1519, he still had in his possession a portrait he may have begun as early as 1503, the *Mona Lisa*, now in the Louvre in Paris.

Leonardo da Vinci
Ginevra de' Benci
c. 1474
National Gallery of Art
Ailsa Mellon Bruce
Fund



In his long career the sixteenth-century Venetian master Titian attained a level of international renown unmatched by any of his contemporaries except Michelangelo. Popes, Venetian noblemen, and the aristocracy of northern Europe, as well as the rulers of the great Italian courts, all vied for his services. The paintings of religious subjects, portraits, and scenes from classical mythology and history that Titian created for his patrons elevated him to a princely status that reflected the new Renaissance perception of the artist as a creative individual rather than a craftsman.

Born in the mountain village of Cadore, Titian arrived in Venice as a young boy and, after a brief apprenticeship to the mosaicist Zuccato, he moved on to the workshops of Gentile and Giovanni Bellini. It was Giorgione, however, who was subsequently to exercise the strongest influence on his work. Titian's success in imitating the lyrical manner of Giorgione's paintings, with their soft contours and deep shadows, often caused their work to be confused.

In 1516 Titian succeeded Giovanni Bellini as official painter to the Venetian republic, which called on him to produce ducal portraits, religious and historical paintings for the doge's palace, and other works for ceremonial occasions. As his fame spread, Titian attracted the attention of illustrious patrons beyond Venice, notably the Hapsburg Holy Roman Emperor Charles V (who knighted the artist and made him court painter in 1533) and his son King Philip II of Spain. Legend has it that Charles V was so in awe of Titian's abilities that when the artist dropped a brush, the emperor paid him the unheard-of honor of picking it up for him.

As no other artist before him had done, Titian mastered the medium of oil on canvas. Oil-based paints had been used by earlier artists, but it was Titian who first saw the possibilities of this medium for expressing tactile qualities and the effects of color, light, and atmosphere. His vivid palette and application of layer upon layer of translucent glazes resulted in works of dazzling warmth and richness of tone. Titian's ability to handle paint enabled him to dispense with traditional rules of composition in many of his paintings and to rely on color to give unity to the scene.

Although Titian painted a wide variety of subjects, in his lifetime his fame rested primarily on his ability as a portraitist. The era of Renaissance individualism led to a great demand for portraits. As his friend and biographer Giorgio Vasari noted, "There was almost no lord, nor prince, nor great lady, who was not painted by Titian." He painted them with all the trappings of their exalted rank but moved beyond a careful depiction of rich costumes and jewelry to probe the character of his subjects.

In his late paintings Titian's palette became more subdued at the same time that his brushwork grew increasingly free. There is a melancholy mood to this work, which perhaps reflects not only the inevitable personal losses of the aging artist but also the waning glory of Venice itself.

Titian
Ranuccio Farnese
1542
National Gallery of Art
Samuel H. Kress
Collection

Ranuccio Farnese was from a prominent Florentine family and the grandson of Pope Paul III; he was age twelve when he was painted by Titian.





THE RENAISSANCE IN THE NORTH



In the early fifteenth century, a renewed interest in mankind and the physical world emerged in the art and culture of northern Europe, as it did in Italy, although the outlook and methods were different. In general, the intellectuals of the Italian Renaissance sought abstract, idealized systems to explain mankind and the universe, whereas northern society tended to be interested in the specific, imperfect reality of the everyday world. The northern approach was deeply influenced by nominalism, a philosophical outlook of the earlier Middle Ages, which was revived in the fourteenth century by an English Franciscan monk, William of Ockham. Nominalism led to direct observation and inductive research, the empirical method successfully employed by Renaissance scientists.

This reliance on observation encouraged northern European artists to gradually move away from depicting objects as highly abstract, flattened forms set in unrealistic space. Pictures became less symbolic and more natural-looking; their space was more three-dimensional. This empirical outlook fostered the development of portraiture, landscape, still life, and genre scenes. Northern artists were able to rediscover classical **aerial perspective** in the early fifteenth century, achieving pictorial depth not only by reducing the size and scale of objects in the distance but also by lessening the clarity of their outline and color. They arrived at one-point perspective not long after the Italians developed the more theoretical, mathematically based linear perspective system.

Religious art in the North was influenced by mysticism. This ancient belief, which gained popularity in the Middle Ages, held that direct knowledge of God or spiritual truth is attainable through personal prayer and meditation without reliance on the teachings of the clergy. Mysticism influenced the development of devotional themes such as the Pietà (depiction of the Virgin Mary holding the dead body of Christ) and was a major factor in the striving for greater realism in order to engage the emotions of the viewer.

Opposite:
Albrecht Dürer
Adam and Eve
1504, engraving
National Gallery of Art
Gift of R. Horace
Gallatin

The developments in philosophy and religion by the end of the fourteenth century were accompanied by changes in social and political power in northern Europe. The Church, once the central political power unifying western Europe, declined in influence. As in Italy, more authority was concentrated in the hands of powerful rulers and the urban middle class.

During this period the most important and influential of the northern royal houses, the Valois of France, was established. This dynasty not only ruled over some of the most important urban centers in Europe but also set the tone for the elaborate court life that was to develop over the next two centuries. During his reign in the late fourteenth century, Charles V established one of the first great secular libraries, employing learned men to copy, translate, and decorate religious, classical, and secular texts. Charles and his brothers—Jean, Duke of Berry; Louis, Duke of Anjou; and Philip the Bold, Duke of Burgundy—established a sophisticated court culture that was imitated throughout Europe. In re-establishing the power and prestige of France, they also helped to inaugurate a wave of conspicuous consumption that stimulated the economy of a depressed Europe. The new taste for luxurious clothing, for example, was an important factor in the accumulation of wealth by middle-class cloth merchants in Bruges and Florence. It has been stated that the Renaissance was fueled by this new craving for elaborate fashion that swept over western Europe. In addition, the almost insatiable quest for objects of quality by the Valois court proved a powerful incentive for artists of all media.

By the beginning of the fifteenth century, the cultivated taste of these courts had produced a style that contained elements of exquisite refinement as well as a greater naturalism. Jewel-like coloration, flowing lines, and rich materials, as well as a new feeling for illusionistic space and atmosphere and greater three-dimensionality, were the characteristic features of what became known as the International Style, owing to its dissemination to many other parts of Europe. So similar in style are many of these works that it is often difficult for present-day art historians to agree on their place of origin. Such is the case with the *Death of Saint Clare* by the Master of Heiligenkreuz.

The courtly traditions of the Valois lived on in the fifteenth century in the Netherlands, where Philip the Good transferred the Burgundian court. This move by the new Duke of Burgundy was based on his recognition of the growing importance of the towns of Flanders, such as Bruges and Brussels, whose cloth trade had made them wealthy international commercial centers.

Much of the power in the southern and northern Netherlands (now modern Belgium and Holland) rested with the increasingly wealthy middle class of the commercial cities. Not surprisingly, they preferred art that celebrated their middle-class world. This strain of naturalism in the International Style grew to dominate the art of the Netherlands in the first quarter of the fifteenth century. Painters depicted the Virgin Mary as a bourgeois maiden in a typical Flemish interior, Joseph as a tradesman at work in his shop, with the streets of Flemish towns shown outside their windows. Developments in the technique of oil painting by artists like Jan van Eyck enabled this style to celebrate the contemporary world with unprecedented realism.

Franco-Flemish Artist
Profile Portrait of a Lady
c. 1410
National Gallery of Art
Andrew W. Mellon
Collection

This portrait is attributed to an artist working for the Valois court. The sitter must have been a woman of importance, as independent portraits from this time are extremely rare.



Culture and commerce flourished in the Netherlands under the leadership of Philip the Good. Court festivals and celebrations became even more elaborate and costly during Philip's reign as a result of his ambition to establish his duchy as one of the great powers of Europe.

Despite the pomp and worldly display of the court, religion, particularly mysticism, became an even greater force in the Netherlands and deeply influenced the visual arts. For painters like Rogier van der Weyden and his followers, depictions of nature in all its variety became less important than expressiveness or simple peace and contemplation.

Germany

During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries Germany was a loose confederation of principalities and cities forming the largest part of the Holy Roman Empire. Although the visual arts suffered from the pervasive poverty and political turmoil of the country, the fifteenth century did see notable contributions to the International Style, such as the *Death of Saint Clare* by the Master of Heiligenkreuz. During the latter part of this century, however, artistic innovation waned as many artists adapted a variant of the Flemish style of Rogier van der Weyden or emulated other acknowledged masters.

At the same time, graphic artists developed sophisticated techniques and original motifs in engraving and woodcut that helped prepare the way for the important contributions of Albrecht Dürer, Lucas Cranach the Elder, and Hans Holbein the Younger in the sixteenth century. Sculptors such as Tilman Riemenschneider of Würzburg and Veit Stoss of Nuremberg created elaborately carved wooden altarpieces that were unequaled in northern Europe for their energetic and expressive design.

The social and artistic situation in Germany in the sixteenth century would not seem to have been fertile ground for the new learning and arts of the Renaissance. Yet they did flourish here, producing some of the most important intellectuals and artists of the European Renaissance. While the ensuing turmoil of the Reformation stifled much of this creativity, the revolution in religious belief itself would not have been possible without the intellectual ferment fostered by the German Renaissance.

Among the most important northern humanists was Erasmus of Rotterdam, a cleric who sought to reform the Roman Catholic Church, hoping to unite the virtues of Christianity with those of antiquity. As critical as he was, Erasmus never separated himself from the Church nor did he attack its teachings. These more radical steps were undertaken by a younger monk, Martin Luther of Wittenberg. What started out in 1517 as a local theological dispute, in which Luther decried the selling of indulgences by the Church, gained momentum. The text of his protest, called the *95 Theses*, was printed in translation and distributed all over Europe. The local controversy, aided by the printing press, became an international revolt, permitting the populace for the first time in history to judge for itself revolutionary ideas.

Wenceslaus Hollar
Martin Luther
engraving
Folger Shakespeare
Library
Washington, D.C.



MARTINVS LV THERVS *Theologus germaniæ Elias*
Natus Iſlebiæ anno 1483. obiit in patria anno 1546.

Wenſlaus Hollar fecit.

Ioan. Meiffens exc. Antverpiæ

T.A. Dean
Henry VIII
engraving after
Hans Holbein
Folger Shakespeare
Library
Washington, D.C.



Most of the great northern artists of this era—Dürer, Holbein, Cranach, and Grünewald—were in some way connected with the intellectual circles that flourished in the princely and clerical courts, as well as in the universities and publishing houses. They represent a golden age in the history of German art, inspired by humanist and empiricist methods in searching for the truth or by the spiritual fervor stemming from mysticism. Sadly, these circumstances lasted a very short time. Although Luther did not oppose the use of visual arts for religious purposes, many of his followers did object. The iconoclasm this engendered, the Peasants' Revolt of the 1520s, and the ensuing internal wars effectively put an end to this golden age.

England

Many factors served to keep the new learning of the Renaissance out of England until well into the sixteenth century: a poor, declining population, political turmoil, limited contact with the continent, lack of printing presses, and an educational system that left learning to the clerics. Opportunities for artistic patronage were few; what little survives in painting is poor indeed.

It was not until the reign of Henry VII (1485–1509), first of the Tudor kings, that the political situation stabilized long enough to allow new colleges to be founded that encouraged the new learning. By 1516, England had produced a scholar of the magnitude of Sir Thomas More, whose *Utopia* reached beyond the criticism of contemporary life and religion to ask how a good Christian society should be organized. After Henry VIII's break with the Roman Catholic Church in 1534, the arts in England became almost exclusively secular. Although in this respect they were in advance of the arts on the continent, the English nonetheless clung tenaciously to the Gothic style, particularly in architecture.

The cessation of religious art and Henry VIII's need to promote his right to the throne coincided with Hans Holbein's career in England. His portraits reflect the desire for a sumptuous display of finery by the king and his court. At the same time, Holbein also conveyed with penetrating insight the character of his sitters. Holbein's work set a standard for English portraiture for many years to come, and portraits became the principal work of English painters for the next two and a half centuries.

The Tudor monarchy's encouragement of navigation and commerce brought new wealth and a more luxurious lifestyle to England. During the reign of Henry VIII's daughter Elizabeth I (1558–1603), England became a cohesive nation and took on a distinctive character. The visual arts produced few native masters, but music and literature flourished, crowned by the enduring achievements of William Shakespeare.

Jan van Eyck of Bruges was one of the first painters of the European Renaissance to achieve international recognition. Court painter and friend of Philip of Burgundy, he was praised by the Italian humanists as early as the middle of the fifteenth century as the “prince of painters” and listed among the most famous artists of his time. A lack of surviving documentation has made it difficult to learn many details of his life. However, modern research supports the belief that Van Eyck hailed from the town of Maaseyck in the Limburg area of what is now Belgium. He came from a family of painters, of whom very little is known. It seems likely that all could have received their artistic training in a family workshop in or around Maaseyck before moving to the wealthier towns and courts of Flanders, as did so many artists of this area before them.

Van Eyck’s exact birth date is not known, but he was probably a mature artist when his name first appears as “master Jan the painter” in court records of the Bishop of Liège in 1422. His considerable talents were recognized by Philip of Burgundy, who hired him as his *valet de chambre* in 1425 and subsequently sent him abroad on many diplomatic missions. Despite their close relationship, none of the artist’s extant works are known to have been commissioned by the duke. Yet he no doubt kept Van Eyck very busy with the variety of tasks normally undertaken by court painters.

Not long after Philip’s marriage to Isabella of Portugal in 1430, Van Eyck ceased much of his ambassadorial travel, settling down in Bruges, taking a wife, and completing a huge altarpiece that had been left unfinished in his brother Hubert’s studio in Ghent when the latter died in 1426. Since its completion in 1432, this huge polyptych, known as the Ghent Altarpiece, has never ceased to be an object of admiration and wonder. It was one of the first masterpieces to treat a flat panel as if it were a window, enabling the viewer to look out onto a vast landscape or into a believable interior room. From the beginning, this realism astonished viewers, bringing fame to Van Eyck and the city of Ghent. A century later Albrecht Dürer made a special visit to see this great work.

Van Eyck lived only nine more years after the completion of the Ghent Altarpiece. He continued to paint exquisitely realistic works, though never again on this scale. Fewer than twenty paintings by Van Eyck survive, mostly religious works and portraits, including the National Gallery’s *Annunciation*. All present the world in a “microscopic–telescopic vision,” as the art historian Erwin Panofsky described Van Eyck’s ability to depict the smallest details as well as vast interior and exterior space. Unlike Renaissance artists in Italy, Van Eyck accomplished this not through scientific or mathematical means, nor did he resort to the classical past for form or subject matter. Rather he recorded the world around him by relying solely on experience and observation.

So accurate are his renderings of the objects he saw and the people he knew that his work is an important historic resource. Van Eyck's range and precision of representation were made possible through his mastery of the oil-painting technique (see section on Art Techniques).

As with many paintings by northern Renaissance artists, some of the attributions of Van Eyck's works are controversial. However, he not only signed and dated some of his paintings but also added a personal motto: *Als ich chan* (As Best I Can). On viewing a work by Jan van Eyck, one finds it difficult to imagine how it could have been improved. Few artists in history have matched his perfection.

Jan van Eyck
The Annunciation, detail
c. 1434/1436
National Gallery of Art
Andrew W. Mellon
Collection



Albrecht Dürer's ceaseless quest for the truth about man and his world has led to his being called the "Leonardo of the North." Influenced by the intellectual circles of Nuremberg, he sought to understand the world not only through direct observation but also by searching for ideal beauty. His commitment to the latter goal led him to study the work of ancient authors such as Vitruvius, as well as that of contemporary Italian artists, including Alberti, Mantegna, and Bellini.

Albrecht Dürer
The Four Horsemen
c. 1496/1498, woodcut
from "The Apocalypse"
National Gallery of Art
Rosenwald Collection



Dürer was deeply religious and, like his contemporary, the Dutch theologian Erasmus, he tried to synthesize the humanistic concerns of the Renaissance with the devout, mystical Christian world. He may not have achieved his goal of synthesizing these two important aspects of the Renaissance world, but on another level, he gained a worldly success unequaled by any other artist of his time. His woodcuts and engravings, widely disseminated through the growing number of printed books and illustrations, earned him popular recognition on an international level.

Dürer was born in Nuremberg, the son of a goldsmith, who probably taught him engraving techniques. The few early works that have survived reveal a precocious talent that seems to have been recognized by his father, who apprenticed him at the age of fifteen to Michael Wolgemut, who operated Nuremberg's leading workshop for altars and woodcut illustrations. After working there for three years, Dürer embarked on his "wanderjahre"—an extended period of travel and study to gain knowledge of new techniques and ideas. He seems to have traveled as far as the Netherlands and is known to have visited Colmar, Strasbourg, and Basel before returning to marry in 1494. He then made the first of two trips to Venice, returning again in 1505.

Between the first and second Italian trips, Dürer achieved fame and prosperity as a printmaker; his "Apocalypse" series of woodcuts, in particular, were sold throughout Europe. In his development of techniques for woodcuts and copper engravings, he raised the print medium to heights never before reached. He refined the modeling of forms and the definition of textures, introducing a new sense of luminosity with the simple means of black lines and dots. Erasmus likened his printmaking abilities to the renowned talents of the most famous painter of antiquity, calling Dürer "the Apelles of black lines."

In prints as well as paintings, Dürer searched for ideal beauty, mastering linear perspective and a harmonious method of employing these new techniques in the service of Christian art. Despite Italian theories on ideal proportions, Dürer's observations convinced him that the human body varied so greatly that more than one canon of proportions was needed. Recognizing the importance of printed books in disseminating new ideas, he wrote and illustrated treatises on perspective and human proportions.

The dual aspects of Dürer's probing mind—the search for the ideal and the recognition of the real—pervade his work throughout his career. Toward the end of his life he finally succeeded in synthesizing these tendencies, creating figures with a breadth and monumentality equal to the work of Raphael and Michelangelo, but with distinctive northern individuality.

Hans Holbein's ability to capture reality and the circumstances of his life and times served to produce one of the finest portrait painters of the European Renaissance. His activity in various cities of northern Europe, especially Basel, and in London has left us with a memorable record of many of the most important people of the age.

Holbein was born into a family of painters from Augsburg. His father, Hans Holbein the Elder, had a talent for insightful portraiture, which he passed on to this son. Hans the Younger and his brother journeyed to Basel, where the opportunities for employment in this busy publishing center persuaded Holbein to settle for many years. In addition to designing woodcuts for Basel's book publishers, he received important religious and civic commissions from some of the town's leading citizens.

Holbein's work for publishers introduced him to some of the educated elite of Basel, notably Erasmus of Rotterdam. Their friendship was important for Holbein, as it would subsequently provide entry into the circle of the English humanist Sir Thomas More, a close friend of Erasmus'. Because of the religious controversy engulfing Basel in the wake of the Reformation, many of the ecclesiastical commissions on which Holbein had depended were no longer available. As a result, he embarked for London in 1526 in search of new patronage. Erasmus' letter of introduction to More, then Speaker of the House of Commons, assured Holbein of portrait commissions in England. Holbein produced numerous paintings of More and his circle, including the unflinchingly realistic portrait of *Sir Brian Tuke*, a humanist scholar and adviser to Henry VIII. Tuke's administrative career is summarized in his motto, *Droit et Avant* (Upright and Forward), inscribed on the background of his portrait.

Henry's angry suppression of those who opposed his anti-papal policies—especially More, whom he had imprisoned and subsequently beheaded—left Holbein without his former source of patronage. As a result, Holbein returned to Basel in 1528, where he found the Reformation unrest even greater than before. In order to retain his appointment as city-artist, he was forced to convert to the Protestant religion, an action that no doubt influenced his decision to return to England, this time permanently, in 1532. The political situation in London proved to be not much more conducive to lucrative commissions than was Basel. He turned to the colony of businessmen in London from the Hanseatic League (a mercantile confederation of North German cities), who admired the realism of Holbein's portraits and his ability to render their elaborate costumes and possessions with great detail and accuracy.

During the mid-1530s Holbein must have come to the attention of Thomas Cromwell, counselor to the king, who was leading the propaganda campaign to ensure the continuance of the Tudor dynasty and to increase Henry's popularity and power. By 1536 Holbein is mentioned as court painter, and in the intervening years until his death in 1543, he created majestic works of Henry, his son, Edward VI, his wives and prospective brides. These figures fill the field of the painting, posed formally and dressed in elaborate court costumes of rich, deep colors, embroidered with gold and trimmed with fur, creating almost flat decorative patterns. The sitters and their finery are depicted with the clarity and microscopic details that are a hallmark of Holbein's style. If Henry VIII personifies our mental image of the preeminent Renaissance king—with a power unequalled by any other ruler of his time—it is because Hans Holbein was there to implant his memory indelibly in our minds.

Hans Holbein
the Younger
Sir Brian Tuke
c. 1527
National Gallery of Art
Andrew W. Mellon
Collection







Art in Context contains specific information on the works reproduced in color prints and slides—all from the collections of the National Gallery of Art. The information generally consists of a brief biography of the artist and an explanation of the work of art, describing its appearance, use, and meaning within its historical context. The images have been organized into six sections: *Artistic Background—The Proto-Renaissance, Christian Themes, Classical Themes, Portraiture, Nature and the Figure, and Artists and Patrons*. These sections provide a way of approaching these works of art and represent significant types and topics that characterize European Renaissance art. It should be noted that many of the works fall into several categories and that their inclusion in only one section has been done for the sake of simplicity.

Opposite:
Sebastiano del Piombo
*A Prophet Addressed
by an Angel*
1516/1517
Chalk on paper
National Gallery of Art
Gift of Robert H. and
Clarice Smith

SECTION I: ARTISTIC BACKGROUND— THE PROTO-RENAISSANCE



The first half of the fourteenth century witnessed a major shift in painting, with the symbolic and otherworldly character of medieval art giving way to the realism of the Renaissance. The paintings in this section mark the transition from that symbolic medieval tradition to a new realism based on close observation of the visible world. The flatness of the Byzantine style, with its rigid compartmentalized figures, gave way to painting that created an illusion of depth, peopled with lifelike figures drawn from nature.

In the second half of the fourteenth century, a new style of painting became popular throughout the courts of Europe. Known as the International Style, it was characterized by a realistic treatment of subject matter, flowing lines, and jewel-like coloration. The realism of the International Style, however, was primarily concerned with details of costume and landscape rather than the naturalism of Giotto's art, which did not reappear until the fifteenth century.

Giotto di Bondone
 (Jya-toe dee Bone-done-ay)
 Florentine (probably 1266–1337)
Madonna and Child, c. 1320/1330
 Tempera on wood, 33⁵/₈ x 24³/₈
 Samuel H. Kress Collection

Giotto's paintings mark a major turning point in the history of art. The solidity and humanity of his figures, compared with the stylized artifice and flatness of Byzantine art, introduced a naturalistic approach to painting that would, a century later, develop into the Italian Renaissance. The great writers of his day—Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio—all hailed Giotto's greatness. In the *Decameron*, Boccaccio wrote that Giotto "brought back to light" the art of painting "that for many centuries had been buried under the errors of some who painted more to delight the eyes of the ignorant than to please the intellect of the wise."

Giotto's *Madonna and Child* was the central element of a five-section polyptych, or altarpiece in many panels, believed to have been painted for the Church of Santa Croce in Florence. Byzantine influence is still evident in the background of **gold leaf**, but Giotto's mother and child bear no resemblance to the remote, otherworldly figures that inhabited such paintings. Here the figure of Mary is broad and sturdy, and she holds a Christ child



who appears more human than divine. Grasping his mother's left index finger for balance, the child reaches with his other hand for the white flower held in Mary's right hand. These tender gestures combine with the heavy folds of her drapery, the tangible shadows, and the large scale of the figures to convey a human, earthly quality. This feeling is further reinforced by the way Mary gazes out of the picture, her lips gently parted as if about to speak.

The white flower delicately held by Mary at the center of her body serves as the compositional and symbolic focus of the painting. The child's hand leads away from the flower toward the right, enabling Giotto to use a more interesting pose for the baby, balanced on one side of his mother, without minimizing Christ's presence. Symbolically, the white flower alludes to the purity of Mary, and also to humanity's loss of innocence through Original Sin. Christ, who has come into the world as redeemer, shows his acceptance of this destiny by reaching for the flower.

Giotto's naturalism and his ability to create the illusion of depth on a flat surface, giving viewers the sense of witnessing a live pageant, were astonishing to his fellow Florentines. They commented on how they could almost reach out and touch Giotto's subjects, identifying with them as if they were part of their daily lives. Embedded in Giotto's art was the belief that the Christian faith is not otherworldly and inaccessible but able to be understood in a human context.

Duccio di Buoninsegna
 (Dew-choe dee Bwon-eeen-sane-ya)
 Siennese (c. 1255–1318)
The Nativity with the Prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel,
 1308/1311
 Oil on wood,
 left panel: 17¼ x 6½
 middle panel: 17¼ x 17½
 right panel: 17¼ x 6½
 Andrew W. Mellon Collection

Just as Giotto's new style of painting made him the pride of Florence, his contemporary Duccio di Buoninsegna was hailed by the people of Siena. Few occasions in that city could have been more memorable than the triumphal procession in June 1311 when Duccio's newly completed great altarpiece, the *Maestà*, or "Our Lady in Majesty," was carried from the artist's studio to the high altar of the Cathedral of Siena.

This painting was once part of the *Maestà*, which originally consisted of more than ninety separate panels depicting scenes from the lives of Christ and Mary, with prophets, angels, and saints. By the early sixteenth century the altarpiece was dismantled, its panels subsequently dispersed among various museums and private collections. The central panel and symbolic focus of the altarpiece (now in the cathedral museum in Siena) depicts the Virgin enthroned in majesty amid a celestial court. The National Gallery's scene of the Nativity, flanked by small panels representing the prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel, is considered one of the finest sections from the lower front of the altarpiece.

Mary, the focal point of the Nativity scene, reclines within the shelter of a stable that is built into a grotto. Lying nearby in a manger, the Christ child is warmed by the breath of the ox and the ass. To Mary's left is an elderly, gray-bearded Joseph, who keeps watch while a choir of angels exalts the birth of the Son of God. Using the traditional medieval device of **simultaneous narrative**, Duccio included events described in the gospel of Luke as concurrent with or coming after the Nativity. For example, on the right, an angel with a scroll announces to the shepherds the birth of Christ. The artist also drew inspiration from apocryphal legends about the Nativity, including a scene of the Christ child's first bath given by midwives in the lower center of the panel.

The bright colors and gold background are characteristic elements of the Byzantine style, and the large scale of the Virgin reflects the medieval approach to emphasizing her importance to the story. The languid flow of line and decorative grace anticipate the new International Style. At the same time Duccio also foreshadows the Renaissance concern for creating the illusion of depth and solid form. For example, his figures are modeled with light and shadow and the walls of the stable appear to recede in space. Thus the Siennese artist combined the Byzantine style with the Gothic manner of western Europe to produce a new, truly Italian artistic expression that would culminate in the Renaissance of the next century.



Master of Heiligenkreuz
 (Hy-leeg-en-kroytz)
 Austrian (active early fifteenth century)
The Death of Saint Clare, c. 1410
 Oil on wood, 26 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 21 $\frac{3}{8}$
 Samuel H. Kress Collection

This painting by the Master of Heiligenkreuz is an example of the courtly International Style that flourished in much of Europe during the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. As such, it also highlights some of the problems of this style. Like many northern European paintings of this era, the artist is unknown; he is thus named after panels found in a convent in Heiligenkreuz, Austria. This anonymity, as well as the similarity of his style to that in other areas—elongated figures, brilliant colors, rich court attire, naturalistic details, and generous use of gold—suggests to scholars that the artist was active in France, Germany, Austria, or Bohemia. The inability to give a more exact location shows how thoroughly the court style of Paris had penetrated other regions of Europe.

Saint Clare, the first female disciple of Saint Francis of Assisi and founder of the order of Poor Clares, died in 1253. Her canonization two years later was based partly on the vision depicted here, which appeared to one of her followers as Clare lay dying. The Virgin Mary, regally attired in brocade robes and a crown,



accompanied by five female saints, appeared at Clare's bedside as her soul—represented by a praying baby girl dressed in red and white robes—was received into heaven by Christ.

Groups of angels playing instruments, carrying banners, or waving censers attend the holy figures. Each of the elaborately dressed saints is identified by her particular **attribute**: beside the Virgin stands Saint Catherine, identified by the wheel associated with her martyrdom; Saint Helen, wearing the eagle of the Roman Empire on her crown; Saint Barbara, holding the tower of her imprisonment; Saint Dorothy, holding a basket of flowers; and at the foot of the bed, Saint Margaret, holding a dragon. The woman in the long blue cape is probably Clare's sister, Beata Agnes of Assisi, whose attribute is the lamb. A touch of naturalism appears in the homely nuns, dressed in the gray habit of the order and smaller in scale, who sit around the bed, oblivious to the presence of the otherworldly figures.

The panel was originally part of a diptych (a two-panel painting or altarpiece). The other half, depicting *The Death of the Virgin*, is now in the Cleveland Museum of Art. The work probably was made for a Clarist convent and was most likely used in funerary or commemorative services for the dead. While the Death of Saint Clare is a rare subject in art, it depicts a scene common enough in society of the time. Life in the Middle Ages was essentially communal—people ate, slept, worked, relaxed, and worshiped together. In the monastic environment, death was an especially public event, witnessed by the members of the community who kept a bedside vigil until the last breath was drawn. With the emphasis on the individual that was a key factor in the development of the Renaissance, the desire for privacy took precedence over the communal way of life, helping to end the Middle Ages.