

**Naturalism
&
Renaissance Art**

Premise

A growing interest in naturalism led many Renaissance painters to relinquish hierarchical scale and other means of depiction that were more symbolic than realistic. Artists and theorists began to speak of the painting surface as a window through which you could look into a convincingly three-dimensional world.

Task

Study your painting and decide what visual techniques the artist used to suggest three-dimensional space. Consider whether the artist used one or a combination of the following (which are further defined on the reverse):

- *aerial, or atmospheric perspective*
- *volume and depth through light and shadow*
- *one-point linear perspective*

Try sketching (or tracing) the major lines and masses in the composition to more clearly see how the artist has organized the picture's space. Consider whether the artist's composition and handling of space emphasizes the *thematic focus* of the picture.

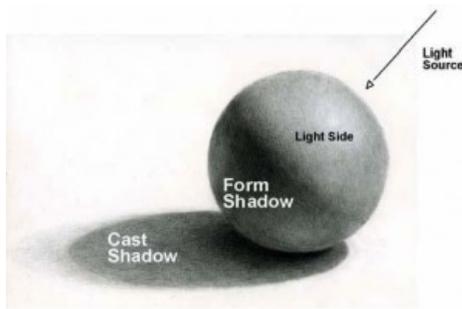
Discuss your findings as a group, and jot down three key observations.

Aerial, or atmospheric perspective

The optical effect produced by diffusion of light in the atmosphere which gives more distant objects less clarity of outline and lighter tonalities. This type of perspective concerns the clarity and detail of forms.

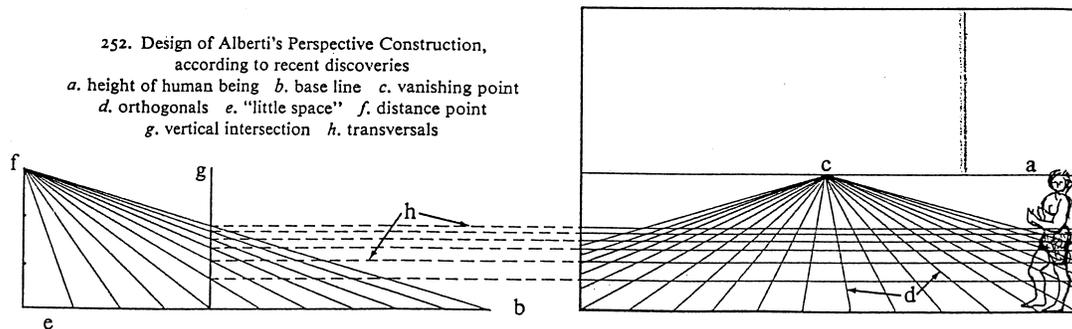
Volume and depth through light and shadow (*chiaroscuro*)

Related to aerial or atmospheric perspective, gradations of light and dark can suggest volume and depth. A light striking an object or figure will cast shadows, which will vary in tone and value. A circular line or solid shape on a page appears flat; an implied light source allows for illusions of three dimensions.



One-point linear perspective

Italian humanist Leon Battista Alberti published a treatise on painting (c.1435) that provided the first written account on how to construct pictures in three-dimensional perspective. His approach helped to establish the relative size and proportion of forms by using a structure of parallel lines that converge on a vanishing point on the horizon line. The diagram below demonstrates his approach.



(diagram is from Frederick Hartt's The History of Italian Renaissance Art)

Extensions

Looking at other pictures in the room, can you find any others that demonstrate similar methods of constructing space?

What other visual evidence do you find in these paintings of the Renaissance interest in naturalism and optical truths?