

ART a Facts™

DEC/JAN 2005
Vol. 8 No. 3 Secondary

Magazine
ISSN 1535-9115

Italian & Northern Renaissance Art

1400-1600



Eyck, Jan van (c.1390-1441) *The Arnolfini Wedding*. Wedding picture of Giovanni Arnolfini and Giovanna Cenami, Bruges, 1434. National Gallery, London.
Photo Credit: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY

Many changes took place in Europe and the world between 1400 and 1600. Explorer Christopher Columbus discovered America, and Magellan sailed around the globe. Trade expanded to places it had never been before.

People began to think more about the present. They wanted to enjoy pleasures and material possessions instead of saving and preparing for heavenly rewards, as was done in the Middle Ages. They did not reject Christianity but wanted more control over their own daily lives.

Changes in religious beliefs began when **Martin Luther** of Germany led the Protestant Reformation against the Catholic Church. Luther did not approve of the Church's emphasis on sin and punishment. He resented the severe and excess reprimands Germany's people received from the Pope. In 1521 he came into direct conflict with the Pope over the sale of "indulgences", documents bought for cash in place of doing penance for sins. He believed that only God could grant salvation. Art began to reflect the spirit of the new Protestant faith.

As wealth increased among the middle class, so did their appetite for more knowledge. A flood of books became available for them to buy when the printing press was invented by **Johann Gutenberg** of Germany. People could now read about the human body, plants, animals, exploration, the sciences, politics and art. With this knowledge people began organizing themselves and enacting laws to govern their growing cities. Because of all these new beginnings, this time period is known as the

Where In Time ?

| 1400 - 1450 | 1450 - 1500 | 1500 - 1520 | 1520 - 1600 |
|--|---|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1400-1500 Early Renaissance | 1484 Botticelli <i>Birth of Venice</i> | 1500-1520 High Renaissance | 1520 Magellan circles globe |
| Brunelleschi Florence Cathedral Dome | 1492 Columbus discovers America | 1503-6 Leonardo <i>Mona Lisa</i> | 1520-1600 Mannerism |
| 1420s Perspective discovered | 1495 Art center shifts to Rome | 1508-1512 Michelangelo | 1527 France Sacks Rome |
| 1434 Medici Family in Florence | Leonardo <i>The Last Supper</i> | Sistine Chapel ceiling | 1545-1563 Counter-Reformation |
| 1445-50 Gutenberg invents printing press | 1498-99 Michelangelo <i>Pieta</i> | 1509-11 Raphael Vatican frescoes | 1562 Wars of Religion in France |
| 1453 End of 100 Years War | 1500 Northern Europe Renaissance | 1517 Protestant Reformation | 1600 Jamestown VA |

Europe 1400 - 1600



Renaissance (REN-ne-sance), a french word meaning “rebirth”.

The common elements in the art, literature, and architecture of the Renaissance were taken from the Classic Greek and Roman traditions. Artists of this time discarded the ideas of the Middle Ages. They thought of themselves as intellectuals as well as fine craftsmen. The meanings in their work became as important as the skills involved. The search for an ideal representation of the human body led Renaissance artists to pursue scientific study of the body, including corpses. They devised systems of proportion for the size relationship between parts of the body. Aided by new knowledge in anatomy and perspective, artists achieved great heights in portraiture, landscape, and religious paintings.

The Gothic architectural style of churches and government buildings lasted into the 16th century in northern Europe. The rest of Europe’s architecture returned to the Classic principles of perspective and symmetry. Architects systematically measured the styles and proportions of local Roman ruins. They revived the rounded arch, concrete construction, the domed rotunda, the portico, the barrel vault and the column.

At the time, architect **Filippo Brunelleschi** (brew-nell-LESH-ee) was known as the father of modern engineering. One of his most significant contributions to the Renaissance was **linear perspective**, a mathematical system for representing three-dimensional space on a flat surface. Imaginary lines, converging at a single point known as the **vanishing point**, made objects appear to be in the background or distance. He favored the central-plan church design that replaced medieval basilicas and he constructed a dome for the Florence Cathedral.

Writer, sculptor, painter and architect **Leone Battista Alberti** formulated aesthetic rules and downplayed art’s religious purpose. He urged artists to study history, poetry and mathematics. He wrote the first systematic guide to perspective and provided sculptors with rules for ideal human proportions.

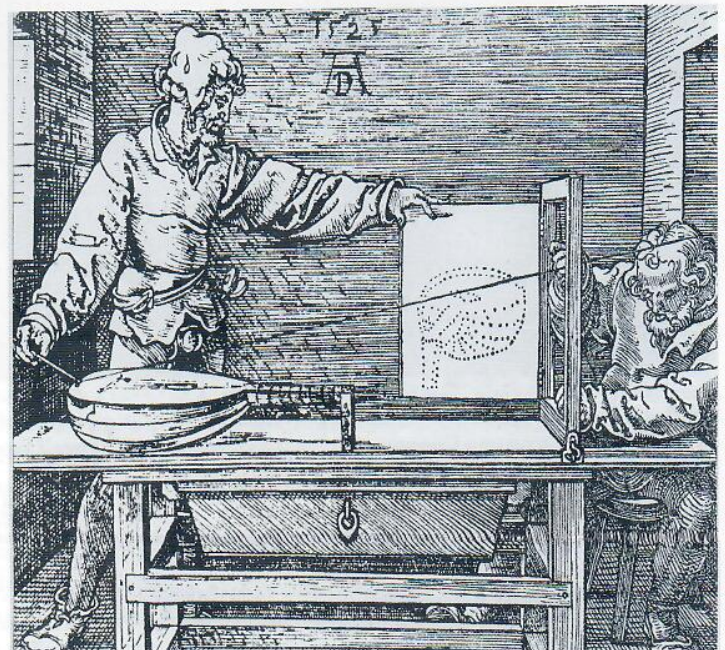
Renaissance art began in Florence in 1400, when Italy was a collection of small competitive city-states, ruled by separate families, like the powerful Medicis of Florence. They wanted to be known for their culture and learning, so they employed fine artists, like Masaccio, Botticelli and sculptor Donatello, to decorate their palaces. The artwork that resulted was the first of the Renaissance period.

Tommaso Masaccio (ma-SAH-chee-oh) was nicknamed “Sloppy Tom” because he neglected his appearance in pursuit of art. He took the fresco painting style of Giotto and combined it with Brunelleschi’s perspective. The result was his painting the *Holy Trinity* was so lifelike that when people saw it for the first time they were frightened.

Sandro Botticelli (botta-Che-lee) was a highly productive and versatile painter, who was sought after by churches and the grand families of France. His paintings of mythological subjects often contained such complex symbolism they were hard to understand. *The Birth of Venus* is one example. His use of line is his most distinctive painting feature. All his forms are outlined and he makes little use of light and shade to create three-dimension. He was more concerned with flowing, decorative designs instead of the look of reality.

Donatello did for sculpture what Masaccio did for painting. From Classical Greek and Roman sculpture, he recaptured the **contrapposto pose**, where the weight of a sculpted form is concentrated on one leg with the rest of the body relaxed and often turned. Donatello carved his figures and draped them realistically, with a sense of their underlying skeletal structure. His sculpture, *David*, was the first life-size, free standing nude sculpture since the Classical period.

Artistic leadership covered Italy, from Florence to Rome to Venice. Florence was the center of the art world and the prestige of artists soared to its peak during the **High Renaissance** period of 1500 to 1580. Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Titian and Raphael created sculptures and paintings with total technical mastery of composition,



Dürer, Albrecht (1471-1528) *Artist drawing a lute from The Artist's Treatise on Geometry*, 1525. Woodcut. Location not indicated.
Photo Credit: Snark/Art Resource, NY



Holbein, Hans the Younger (1497-1543) *The French Ambassadors of King Henry II at the court of the English King Henry VIII*. Oil on canvas (1533). National Gallery, London. Photo Credit: Erich Lessing/ Art Resource, NY

Raphael (rah-fa-yell) Sanzio was taught the rudiments of painting by his father, a mediocre painter. By age 17 he was an independent master. He was called to Rome at age 26 to decorate the Vatican's rooms. Raphael completed his frescoes the same year Michelangelo finished the Sistine Chapel ceiling. Rich, handsome and successful, he went from triumph to triumph as star of the Papal court. Raphael's art expressed all the qualities of the High Renaissance. He borrowed techniques from both Leonardo and Michelangelo. He died at the early age of 37.

The artists of Venice lacked Classical sculpture and architecture for inspiration so they turned to a unique source, their beautiful city. They had reflections from the canals, the dazzling mosaics of Byzantine architecture, decorative churches and plenty of color, lights and textures. Local patrons provided much work for the Venetian artists because owning a painting increased a family's prestige in the city.

Titian (TEESH-un) dominated the art scene in Venice for over sixty years. He was one of the first to begin using oil paint on canvas and abandon painting on wood panels with egg tempera. Like his fellow Venetian painters he used strong color as his main expressive device. He painted the canvas red for warmth. The background, objects and figures were all done in vivid colors and then toned down with thirty to forty layers of glazes. This painstaking method allowed him to portray any texture very convincingly, from flesh to silk to metal.

New developments in art also began about 1400 in the northern European countries of Netherlands and Flanders (Belgium). This **Northern Renaissance** was not a rebirth like that which was taking place in southern Europe because the

northern Europeans did not have Classic examples from Greek and Roman ruins for inspiration. They looked to nature.

The new medium of **oil painting** was perfected by the Northern Renaissance painters. They went from using egg tempera on wood panels to using oil paint on stretched canvas. Oil paint allowed artists to be more precise and more realistic. Oil did not dry fast like egg tempera so colors could be blended, allowing more variations in light and shade, which heightened three-dimensional illusions.

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What are the four major innovations that took place in Renaissance art? Name an artist who used all four innovations in his work.

Compare similarities and differences between the work of Italian Renaissance artists and the work of Northern Renaissance artists.

How would you describe *The Arnolfini Wedding* to a friend? Who are the people? Describe their dress and expressions. In what ways is the picture lifelike? Can you find any examples of symbolism?

Research one of the Renaissance artists in more depth.

Jan Van Eyck of the Netherlands is credited with inventing oil painting. One of his most celebrated paintings is *Arnolfini Marriage*. Van Eyck was a master among the new portrait painters. His paintings are rendered in minute detail in settings of breathtaking realism. Van Eyck liked to use symbols in his paintings. For example, a single candle burning meant the presence of God. A dog was the symbol of loyalty.

Hieronymous Bosch, an odd personality, used the images and compositional methods of the Northern Renaissance to depict irrational dream imagery of sin and good and evil in his paintings. His *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, with its grotesque images of monsters, puzzling symbols and airy landscapes, suggests punishment for sinners and is an example of a moralistic painting. He used new visual techniques and the language of symbols to make the unreal seem real.

Pieter Bruegel (BROO-gul) the Elder, was influenced by Bosch's pessimism and satirical approach. Bruegel chose peasant life as his subject. He painted **genre** scenes of these humble people working, feasting and dancing. His use of Renaissance techniques in these scenes of everyday life elevated his work to the level of fine art.

German artists began to lead the Northern Renaissance in the first quarter of the 16th century. They suddenly understood the advances of their Italian peers. Germany's High Renaissance, with Grunewald's religious paintings, Dürer's technically perfect prints and Holbein's portraits, coincided with Italy's peak of artistic activity.

Hans Holbein the Younger is known as the greatest portrait painter ever. He blended the strengths of the Northern and Southern Renaissance, linking German skill to lines and precise realism. He sought his fortune in England, where he became court painter to King Henry VIII. Portraits were the most important form of painting in England for the next three centuries. *The Ambassadors* is an example of Holbein's high standard of painting.

Albrecht Dürer (Dur-er) was called the "Leonardo of the North" for his diverse interests. He was fascinated with nature and made botanical studies of plants. He published writings about the discoveries in Italy to enlighten his northern colleagues. His work in graphics assured Dürer's reputation as a great artist. **Woodcut prints** were primitive studies in only black and white contrast until he achieved a scale of light to dark by adapting cross hatching from **engraving** to woodcut printing. He used dense lines to render differences in texture and tone. **Dürer** was the first to use printmaking as a major medium of art.



Brueghel, Pieter the Elder (c.1525-1569) *Peasants' Dance*. 1568. Oil on oakwood. Location: Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Austria. Photo Credit: Erich Lessing/ Art Resource, NY

RENAISSANCE WEBSITES

Contains Nudity

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<http://history.evansville.net/renaissa.html>
www.cln.org/themes/renaissance.html
www.cloudnet.com/~edrbass/edhist.htm#renaissance
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www.twingroves.district96.k12.il.us/Renaissance/GeneralFiles/RenLinksArt.html



MUSEUMS



Where YOU can find RENAISSANCE ART:

J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, CA
 National Gallery of Art, DC
 Metropolitan Museum of Art, NYC
 Detroit Institute of Art
 Houston Museum of Fine Arts
 North Carolina Museum of Fine Art

BOOKS ABOUT RENAISSANCE ART

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