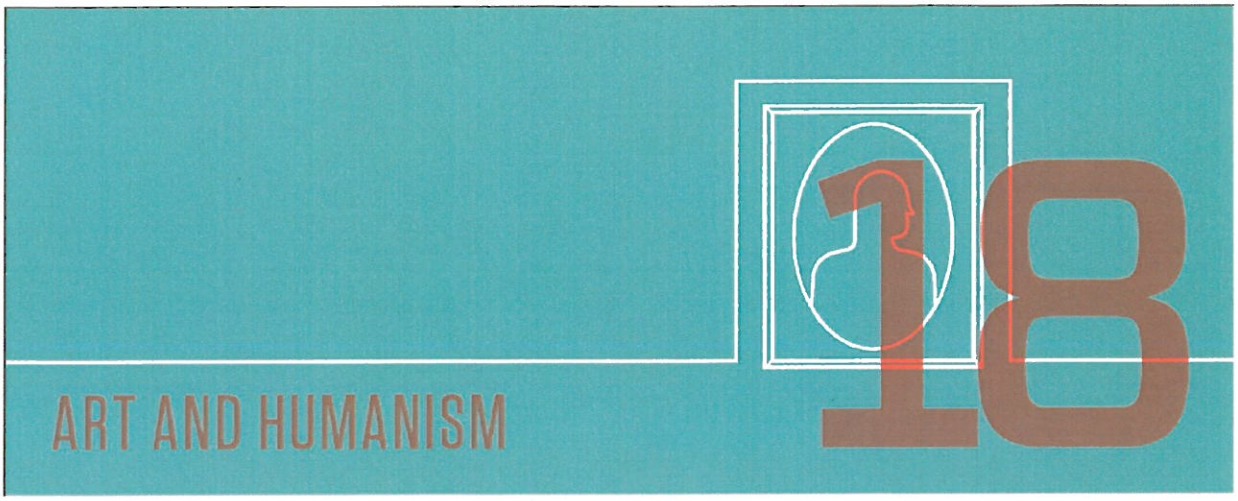


Chapter Objectives

- Define the art of the Renaissance by listing four key characteristics.
- Demonstrate how we see the modern age emerging in the art of this period.
- Show how Renaissance artists were reviving classical ideas in their art.

Among the few things we can say with any certainty about the Renaissance is that it is a revival of interest in the ancient world and a revival of the values of ancient Greece and Rome. Foremost among those are the values of rationalism and humanism. Humanism always begins with the self looking inward; and then what you do with that is you take it and project it out on the world as a kind of measuring stick and your understanding of the world is based on your understanding of yourself. That really is the core idea of what humanist philosophy is all about.

Certainly that's the case with the Renaissance and we are going to see this illustrated in the works of art that we'll be exploring in this chapter. We saw that "The Oration on Human Dignity" by Mirandola challenged us to think about humanism with its bold declaration that man is the "maker and molder of himself." That phrase that we highlighted is a key that really unlocks so much of Renaissance philosophy, art and culture. What we see in a figure like Leonardo da Vinci is nothing less than a Renaissance humanist who is trying to be the maker and the molder of himself. What we see in the case of Michelangelo is a life dedicated to arts and beauty, a life dedicated to the humanistic pursuits of self-knowledge. What we see here is nothing less than man attempting to be the maker and the molder of himself. But these are really values that are foundational to the modern world. This notion of being a self-made man, of taking the resources of human thought, ingenuity and rationalism and building a life on that, and building a culture and a society on that, and these are the things that we see today just as surely as we see those same humanistic values in the Renaissance and beyond that among the ancient Greeks.

We're going to be looking now in greater detail at the Renaissance achievement, and we'll see once again these values of rationalism and humanism everywhere we look as we work through the art of the Renaissance. We are going to isolate four qualities, four aspects that make up the Renaissance achievement. What should emerge from this very brief overview of Renaissance art—too brief an overview for so vast a subject—is a clear picture of how these men like Mirandola and Michelangelo and da Vinci looked at the world around them and themselves. How they asked the big questions about the nature of reality and how they sought for answers to those questions

and then how they expressed that in the beautiful art that they produced.

A Revival of Interest in Classical Subjects

The first quality that we see in Renaissance art is the logical beginning point for everything that follows, and really builds on the things that we said up until this point. This is the revival of interest in classical themes and subjects. If you were an artist in the Middle Ages, what would be the subjects that you would spend your time painting or sculpting? Biblical themes, church subjects. You could paint the Virgin Mary and then you could paint the Virgin Mary and then you could paint maybe a saint and then you could paint the Virgin Mary and so on. It's very repetitive, the list of subjects that you can paint or sculpt as a medieval artist.

It would be absolutely inconceivable for you as a young medieval artist, just starting out as an apprentice in a studio to walk in there on your first day and say, "You know what, I've got some new ideas about art. I think we've really done the Virgin Mary theme to death and I've got this idea, maybe we should start painting some new themes, maybe some pagan classical goddesses would be a good theme for us to explore and paint." You could never consider that option as a medieval painter, it couldn't even occur to you in that hierarchical worldview that we talked about, because what the church sanctioned is what you thought and what you did, and you would not even have conceived of the possibility of painting anything else. So the kinds of things we're looking at here are truly radical and truly revolutionary, in the sense that they break out of the mold of medieval subject matter, medieval values, and medieval ideas that were sanctioned within the hierarchy of the church of the Middle Ages. A late medieval masterpiece, "Madonna and Child Enthroned" by the Italian master Cimabue (c. 1280) illustrates well the art of the late Middle Ages.

We are going to look at two examples of these radical new subjects in Renaissance painting. The first of these, and it's the best example to start with really and it's one that you will find in any textbook on the Renaissance, is a painting by Sandro Botticelli that he did in 1482 known as "The Birth of Venus." (See Color Illustration K.) The title alone tells you that this is something completely new. It's not the Virgin Mary, it's not this saint or that saint, it is Venus, classical pagan fertility goddess. Now to you and me that just looks like an old painting by an old master. It doesn't knock us back on our feet as we look at it, or take our breath away without radical and revolutionary laws, but in the fifteenth century this was something entirely new.

It is a pretty marked departure from the norm, and this is the point I am emphasizing here: there is a revival of interest in classical themes. Venus is a classical goddess. Now, you can imagine how exciting

that would be for an artist. You can now explore all kinds of themes that have been painted for hundreds of years and you can develop your craft and your skill in depicting the human form in the way the wind that blows through Venus' hair and so on, is the nymphs, the gods of the air and so on, and the wind pushing her forward. This is a depiction of a mythological birth, and here she emerges from the ocean riding onto land on an open clamshell.

That's a ridiculous story, just on the face of it, as far as subject matter goes. But the point is that it's something new and it allows the artist to explore the human form, the human figure, new styles and subject matter, and to do so with a completely new set of ideas and values. But the amazing thing is that as fresh and new and revolutionary as this work of art is, it's also old.

There is something of the old in this very new painting. The more you look at Venus, in the center of the canvas, the more she starts to look familiar to you, that is, if you are looking at it from the vantage point of medieval art. Look at Cimabue and Botticelli side by side, and you realize what Botticelli has done. Here we've got the Virgin Mary, here we have got Venus, and suddenly we realize what's going on here, Botticelli is creating something that is revolutionary, that is new, but it's based on the traditions of the past. Where did he learn to paint this kind of archetypal female form? He learned it from the medieval style that he inherits. It's the style Renaissance painters learned and studied in the studios and are now moving beyond. Let's isolate the features of this that are similar as we compare Venus and the Virgin Mary side by side.

Let me give you three shared characteristics that we could isolate here. Let's start with the most basic thing we can see. First of all notice the oval shape to the head, very characteristic of the Virgin Mary, and you can see that here in this medieval painting, you can see that in the Venus painting right here.

Second, notice the slight tilting of the head. This is very characteristic of the iconic portrayals of the Virgin Mary. The head is slightly at an angle, and this softens her image a little; it brings a maternal quality to her form. She is usually holding the Christ Child and her head is slightly at an angle as she looks down at Him. But we see that the head of Venus is slightly tilted as well in that same style of the traditional medieval depictions of the Virgin Mary.

Third, and this is the one that really interests me—notice the position of the arms and the hands, which is like the very traditional way of the medieval painting of the Virgin Mary. Now there is a very practical reason for this in the medieval portraits. She is cradling the Christ Child with the lower arm and with the upper arm she is pointing to Him. But we come now to the Renaissance depiction of Venus and we see that her arms and her hands are positioned very similarly. There is another very practical reason for that; she is covering herself

up. But beyond that we see that Botticelli has taken this traditional form and he is adapting it. Remember, this is the quality of genius that we identified in Myron's "Discus Thrower," that great fifth century Greek work of the athlete hurling the discus. As revolutionary as that was, it was also very traditional in that you could see the old form of the Egyptian style kouros of frontality in that style of art. We are looking at something very similar. We are looking at a work that's a transitional work from an older form to a newer form, and it still exhibits many of the stylistic features of the old form.

Now, let's take that and turn it into a symbol of the Renaissance. What is it that these humanists in the Renaissance are trying to do? What is it that Mirandola was trying to do? Mirandola would have considered himself a good Christian and yet, as we see in his interpretation of the Genesis account of the creation of man, gives us a very humanistic account of that story. What are all of these Renaissance figures trying to do? They are trying to bring their Christianity and their classical pagan humanism over here and bring the two of them together. That's something that they're not going to be successful at doing. We saw that Mirandola wasn't too successful and we're seeing that it's not a very successful thing even in a work of art like this. It creates a beautiful work of art, but, there are a lot of internal contradictions here. Again, turning it into a symbol, this figure of Venus is both a pagan classical goddess, but she is also the Virgin Mary. Another way of putting that is that these humanists are trying to put a Christian head on a pagan goddess. They are trying to bring Christianity and paganism together. It's not going to work. A lot of great art is produced in the process, but it is bound to fail. It is bound to fail because the biblical message is all about the glory of God. Humanism is all about the glory of man, and you can't mix the glory of God and the glory of man. It's going to compromise the truth and so we are going to see that.

Let's look at a second example of this Renaissance obsession with classical culture, Raphael's "The School of Athens." (See below, and Color Illustration L.) This is a great work of art painted around 1510.

What Raphael is trying to do here is pay tribute to the classical world. Let's look in greater detail at some of the figures that are in this painting just to get a sense of what Raphael is trying to do. He is basically saying, "This is where we're drawing our inspiration from, the world of the Greeks, the classical world."

We are going to see some interesting things as we go through this. The figures in the

painting are poets and playwrights and philosophers and mathematicians and politicians and so on, from the ancient world—with Plato and Aristotle right in the middle. We are going to just take a very quick overview of this incredible cast of characters.

Let's first focus on the left side of the painting and as we hone in on it a little bit more, notice this grouping of figures (see above). Let's take a closer look at that, and this is what we see. This is Socrates; he is obviously the best known figure in this grouping, but he is depicted pretty much as we would imagine him, in the marketplace debating philosophy with whoever was willing to take him on. But there are other figures, less well known to most of us, but well known in the classical world. If you look down on the right side you'll see a couple of figures stooping down towards the floor. This is a depiction of Euclid, the great ancient mathematician, and here he is with a compass working out some geometric formulas on a piece of slate. And so we have a whole range of figures, not just poets and philosophers, but scientists and mathematicians depicted in this school of Athens as well.

Let's look at another grouping, also on the right side (see below). On the extreme right side we see Zoroaster and Ptolemy, but the most interesting figure probably is this young man who is looking out of the painting at you and me. This is a self-portrait of Raphael. He has painted himself into this painting, which is a pretty bold thing to do if you think about that: to put yourself in the company of Socrates and Plato and Aristotle and Euclid and so on. But this is how the Renaissance humanists thought. They saw themselves as modern men, but modern men who were re-creating the values of the ancient world. They saw themselves as belonging in this company, and Raphael is putting himself with great pride, certainly, but also a real sense of self-confidence in this group. The larger message that he's communicating by this is: "I'm drawing my inspiration from them and I rightly belong in this company, is really."

Let me point out a couple of more figures to look for in this great painting. The figure sprawled out on the steps is the philosopher Diogenes, the man who told Alexander the Great to get out of the light and stop blocking the sun. Also in the foreground, on Plato's side, is Raphael's portrait of Michelangelo. So he doesn't just paint himself into this painting, but also his friends, his competitor, and it's a great tribute to him to put him in the same company and say Michelangelo belongs with the great figures of the ancient world. These men that we are going to be looking at, these artists like Raphael and Botticelli and Michelangelo, lived at the same time. Most of them lived in Florence or in Rome. They knew each other, they were not so much friends as they were competitors, vying for the same lucrative commissions from families like the Medici or from the Pope himself, and so it's quite a tribute for Raphael to put his competitor Michelangelo in this scene. Here he is very reflective. It's quite an accurate depiction of what we know of Michelangelo. It's a brooding, melancholy, reflective man and it's as though he is reflecting on what he is going to turn that slab of marble into, what his next work of art is going to be. So *The*

School of Athens is really best described as a tribute to the ancient world, an expression of the veneration that these humanist artists of the Renaissance had for the classical world. As I said, that's the logical starting point as we try to understand the nature of Renaissance art.

The Emergence of the Individual

Let's move onto the second quality. In addition to the revival of the interest in the classical world, a second quality that we identify in Renaissance art and culture, and a very important one, is the emergence of the individual in Renaissance art. We are going to look at three quick examples of this phenomenon that should give a better sense of what we are talking about here. In the Middle Ages, people didn't see themselves as individuals, they saw themselves as occupying a place in the great Chain of Being. They are part of this big, vast hierarchical structure. They didn't see themselves as a unique personality with a unique creative genius and something to contribute to the world. This is very different from what Michelangelo, da Vinci and the other humanists saw themselves as being.

Our first example is another painting by Botticelli. This time it is not a classical painting like "The Birth of Venus," but a traditional theme that you could see in medieval art and you could still see in Renaissance art, a biblical theme, "The Adoration of the Magi," painted around 1475 by Sandro Botticelli. (See Color Illustration M.) As we go through this, we are going to see that it's a very complex painting. It's in a sense no less revolutionary than "The Birth of Venus" in the way Botticelli handles this traditional subject. We'll analyze the painting very briefly and then what should come into focus is that element of individuality that is so characteristic of Renaissance culture. The adoration of the Magi refers to the wise men presenting their gifts at the birth of Christ. We see the Holy Family in the upper central portion of the painting. Notice the traditional depictions of the Virgin Mary, her face, the slight tilt to her head, all those things that we identified a moment ago.

You see the Christ Child looking very much like a little adult, which is how they depicted him both in medieval and Renaissance art. You see a disinterested, sleepy looking Joseph resting his head in his hand and his palm and looking down on the scene. He is one of the interesting figures to look at in these Holy Family portraits. Nobody really knows what to do with Joseph. He is part of the scene, he is connected to it and he is not connected to it; he is on the margins. And here he is looking with a fatherly gaze down on the scene. In the lower central portion of the painting you see one old wise man kneeling before Christ in the immediate center with and impressive red cloak, and you see a younger wise man and you see a third one dressed in white right of center.

These were the three wise men, but interestingly we know who these wise men are or rather who they were. These are contemporary figures in Florence, Italy, at the time that Botticelli was painting this in 1475. These are members of the Medici family. The Medici family was the powerful, wealthy ruling family of Late Medieval and Early Modern Florence, Italy. The elderly man, the one closest to Baby Jesus, is the "godfather" of the Medici family. I use that term because that's a very accurate way to refer to them, almost like a kind of a mob family. They had their hands on pretty much every aspect of civic, political and economic life and they were patrons of the arts. So if you are telling the story of the Renaissance in Italy, you inevitably have to

tell the story of the Medici family, because they funded many of the great art projects. The ones that weren't funded by the church were funded by the Medici, and the Medici. Cosimo, the one kneeling before Christ, is the one that signed Botticelli's paychecks. So it's not surprising, given that he is the one commissioning this work of art, that Botticelli paint them as individuals into his painting. You start to see this element of Renaissance individuality and humanism coming out of this painting.

The fact that these Medici family members are depicted as wise men really raises the question as to what the painting is about. On the surface the adoration of a Magi on the surface means worship. But if you start looking at it a little bit more, that title becomes significantly ambiguous. Is it the adoration of the Magi of the Christ Child or are we adoring the Magi? Is it the adoration of the Medici family? And that's really what's going on here. The focus should be on Christ, the "Word made flesh." This is the most amazing moment in history, where God became man, and everybody seems to have other things that are capturing their interest and attention.

This becomes a painting about Renaissance life, power and culture, and the last thing it's a painting about is Christ, the Incarnation. Well, let's explore this a little bit further. Look at this group of Renaissance courtiers and figures over here and noblemen dressed up in their finery and so on. The man on the extreme left, preening himself and puffing his chest out, seems completely unimpressed by the fact that the "Word is made flesh and dwells among us." People are carrying on conversations and so on, they are talking about all kinds of things, probably that have nothing to do with this remarkable miracle that's in their midst. In other words, look at how all of these vain humanistic qualities of the Renaissance are becoming the subject matter in the foreground of this painting.

Then, to top it all off, on the extreme right hand side, we see this figure in a brown cloak, and he's looking at you and me. This is Botticelli painting himself, as Raphael had done, into his own painting. And so for hundreds of years these people have looked at this painting, Botticelli is looking back out to see what our reaction to his masterpiece is. He is laying claim to it, saying, "This is my work, this is my vision. This is an expression of my individual created genius." This is the quality of individuality that this points us to. But notice here again how in this traditional Christian theme, where the focus should be on Christ, the painting is compromised by all of these individual and humanistic values: the power of the Cosimo Medici clan, the values of Renaissance culture, the values of individual humanism that we see in the artist himself. This is happening because the Renaissance humanists are trying to take their Christian faith and their Classical Humanism and bring the two together, and this is what you get. You get a compromised faith.

Let's look at a second example of the emergence of the individual in Renaissance

art. Here we are going to leave Italy and go to the northern countries. We are going to go to the Low Countries, Flanders, and look at a painting by a Flemish master named Jan Van Eyck that we usually just call, "The Arnolfini Wedding Portrait," painted in 1434. (See above, and Color Illustration N.) It's an early Renaissance painting, fully a generation before Botticelli is painting his masterpieces, and it reminds us that the Renaissance is not just an Italian phenomenon, but it's actually occurring in other places in Europe as well.

This is unquestionably one of the most famous paintings in all of Western art, and you can see this in the National Gallery of Art in London. Your first reaction on looking at it might be to wonder why this is the case. But there are good reasons for it and as we examine this you are going to see that this is a masterful as well as a revolutionary painting in a lot of ways.

This is Mr. and Mrs. Arnolfini on their wedding day and Jan Van Eyck is painting this wedding portrait to commemorate that happy occasion. Mr. and Mrs. Arnolfini are in their home and we start seeing some of the signs of middle-class affluence. The rise of a middle-class in the late Middle Ages was so important to the making of the modern world. We see the sense of wealth in the things that are in their home. Even a little thing like the oranges on a windowsill speak of affluence by way of the fact that they have enough money to buy oranges. There are little domestic touches, such as the slippers in the foreground, and the little dog in the immediate foreground is a traditional symbol of fidelity, and thus an appropriate symbol commemorating this marriage. Mrs. Arnolfini looks like she is about four months along, but that is the traditional way in this period of depicting female beauty, not that she's pregnant, but that she certainly has the potential to become pregnant. She is fertile. In fact, women would artificially pad themselves in their lower abdomen to create that kind of effect, and to you and me that seems very strange, but I can guarantee you that if Jan Van Eyck were to get in a time machine and come forward five or six hundred years to our time he would look at our standards of female beauty and he'd think they are equally bizarre. So these notions are very much culturally dictated, the way we look at beauty, and especially female beauty is something very subject to cultural change throughout human history.

Let's see if we can find a few more interesting things that point us towards this theme of individuality. This is a detail you see on the wall, and before we look at the mirror, look at the chandelier. One of the reasons this is such a famous painting is the extraordinary detail and the shading that you see in that chandelier painted with oil. This is one of the first paintings to use oil, and with oil you could create that extraordinary detail. Then you see the mirror and as you might expect Mr. and Mrs. Arnolfini reflected in the mirror from behind, but in between them you see a couple of figures. These are Jan Van Eyck, the painter, and next to him a young man who is probably his apprentice.

So Jan Van Eyck is doing the same thing Raphael and Botticelli did in painting themselves into their painting. There is that sense of the artist as an individual. But he doesn't want us to lose the message here, so across the wall he writes, "Johannes de Eyck fuit hic 1434", *Jan Van Eyck was here*, and he dates it. It's not like a little piece of graffiti that he is writing on the wall, like some kind of "Kilroy was here" message. Scholars believe that in a sense it's like signing your name as a witness to a marriage certificate and that this painting really commemorates, witnesses, and authenticates that marriage.

As we've seen, the Renaissance was a much broader cultural phenomenon than what just occurred in Italy, but we are kind of focusing on what's happening in Italy, in Florence, in Rome, in the circles that Michelangelo and da Vinci were in, in that period of time in the late 15th and early 16th century. As we look at the art, our point is not just to become lovers of great art and to become able to appreciate it as we talk through the galleries of a museum. As good as that might be, I would say that has really limited usefulness to you and me. It's much more important to be able to understand a work of art, a work of literature, a work of music than it is to appreciate it. What we are trying to do is to take it apart to see how it is a reflection of the values of the age that produced it. We've talked about how the Renaissance was inspired by the classical world, how they looked back at the Greeks and the Romans and they sought to imitate them, and we are going to continue with that theme today as we see how their art was in fact humanistic and rationalistic.

As we have pointed out, another characteristic that emerges in the art of this period is the representation of individuality. Let's look at the third example of this quality of individuality. In addition to Botticelli's "Adoration of the Magi" and Jan Van Eyck's "Arnolfini Wedding Portrait," let's stay in the northern countries and look at a painting by Albrecht Dürer, who was a great German painter contemporary with Michelangelo. He traveled from Germany to Italy where he no doubt saw many of the great works of Renaissance art that were being produced at that time, around the year 1500. He is a worthy contemporary of Michelangelo, and a great artist. He is by no means a second tier artist after the Italian artist. He is one of the greats of the Renaissance, and this is his "Self-Portrait at Twenty-Eight," which he painted around the year 1500. (See Color Illustration O.)

Once again, we are illustrating the quality of individuality. The obvious thing to note here is that this is a self-portrait. It's pretty bold to take yourself as a subject. Again, we don't have any medieval self-portraits; it's incomprehensible within the medieval world view, where any given individual was seen as an inconsequential and insignificant player in the great cosmic hierarchy of things. Thus something very radical has clearly changed as we go from medieval to modern, and that's the thing to keep our eye on.

Then we look at various other little indica-

tors. The fact is, as I mentioned a minute ago, that artists are signing their names to their works of art. Here you see it right up here, signing his name in the Latin form, and then interestingly Albrecht Dürer, who was a great wood-cut artist as well as a great painter, he developed his own little personal logo such that if he had this practice back then he certainly would have trade-marked his logo. Here it is, a big capital A with a little D tucked underneath it and then he puts the date across the top. It's just as good as a little C with a circle around it, always copyrighting that circle, trade-marking this and imprinting that with his own individual sense of ownership.

Now as we look at this painting of himself, the self-portrait at twenty-eight, what is it about this image that you find most surprising when you look at it? It's so life-like, and again he is painting in oil, this new technique. Look at the hand in the foreground. Self-portraits by artists are very interesting to look at because they are always trying to showcase their talent, and the hand is important because you see this in Rembrandt self-portraits. The hand is very prominently displayed, because it is after all the hand that picks up the brush; it's the hand that executes the work of art, the hand that is—symbolically at least—the repository of creative artistic genius. And so the hand is important. Note the hand, he is drawing our attention to something, he is holding or pointing to the fur collar. He is drawing attention to that fancy coat and in particular the fur because this is the most difficult part of the painting to do. Every little strand of that fur is executed precisely with oil, and he wants you to see the skill of the artist in that.

Who does it look like that you are looking at when you look at Albrecht Dürer? I think we all intuitively feel that this looks like a traditional Christian depiction of Christ, that there is that image that it's not a historical or a biblical image, but in the history of Christian art this is very much what we see in the picture of Albrecht Dürer. That's a little disturbing when you recognize that. Is he suffering from some kind of messianic complex here? I mean, is it not bold enough to paint yourself as a subject, but you are going to paint yourself and make yourself look like Christ? What's going on with that? I think that we can come up with a couple of answers. One is that this just takes this sense of Renaissance hubris to a new level. That could be one possibility, but I am not comfortable with that interpretation.

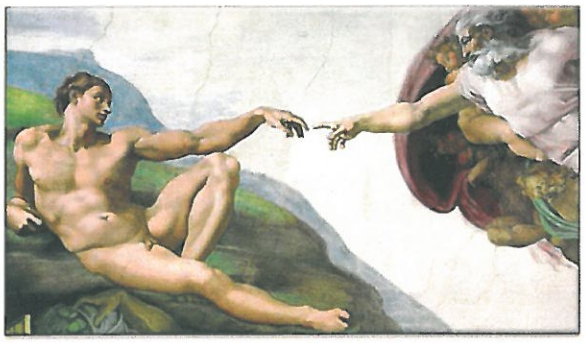
The other interpretation would be to recognize what we know about Albrecht Dürer: he was a very devout Christian. And we have to interpret his painting in light of this. When you look at Albrecht Dürer, who do you see? You see Christ. Now think about the implications of that, think of what Albrecht Dürer might be communicating by that. Possibly what he is communicating is what the Apostle Paul communicates in Galatians when he speaks about how he is dead to himself, right, but he is alive and Christ is the one who is living within him, that Christ life indwelling us such that when you look at the Christian you were to see Christ. And so when we look at Albrecht Dürer we see Christ. It becomes rather a beautiful expression of what the essence of our faith is all about, and I think that's an accurate way to understand what Dürer is saying here, such that this is not some kind of vain Renaissance boast necessarily about his artistic gift and talent, but rather maybe he is saying, "Look at the skill here, my inspiration comes from Christ, my talent comes from Christ." And this painting then can be understood as an active worship being given back to God.

Capturing a Dramatic Moment

Let's move on from this second point to look at the third quality that we see. Renaissance artists tried to capture a dramatic moment in what they painted and sculpted. And again we are going to use a couple of examples to illustrate what we are talking about.

They were very interested that their art capture the reality of life, the vitality of life, the energy of human existence and experi-

ence. The medieval painting by Cimabue is a good example of what these Renaissance artists were reacting against, these medieval types of depictions which are the antithesis of life-likeness and dynamic human experience. In Cimabue's painting of the Virgin Mary there is nothing dramatic happening. She looks like a mannequin propped up in a store window and nothing dramatic has happened to her for hundreds of years and nothing dramatic is going to happen for another hundred years in this particular painting. It is a fixed, static, unchanging artistic tradition. It's dead and lifeless, and Renaissance painters didn't want to paint that way. They saw themselves as active people and players within the world, much as the ancient Greeks did.



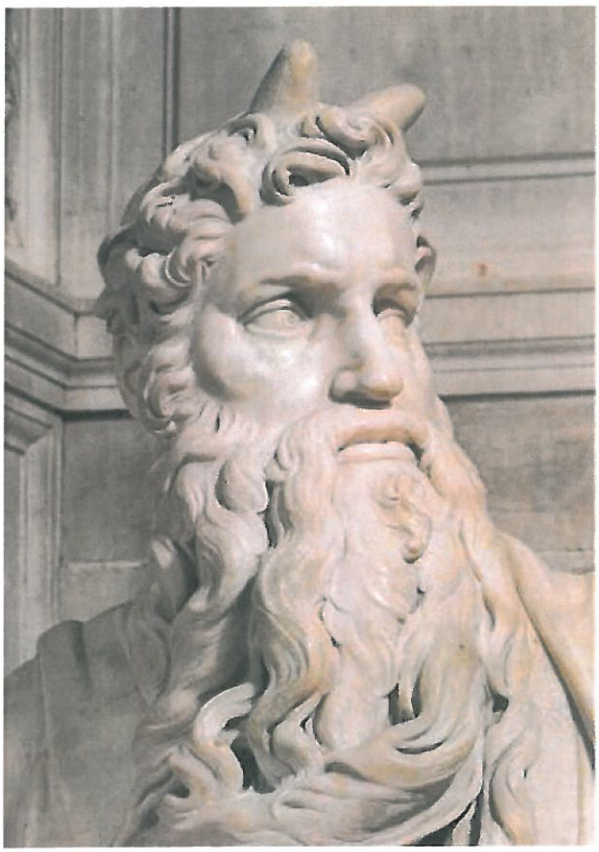
We'll discuss three examples of this. The first is the painting that we've already looked at, the very famous painting by Michelangelo from the Sistine Chapel. This of course is the creation of Adam. This qualifies as a pretty dramatic moment. That split second before Adam became a living soul. I sometimes call this a Kodak moment. We have to snap the picture in just the right moment, when something very dramatic has just happened or is just about to happen, and that's what they are trying to freeze-frame in their art in the Renaissance and capture that intensity of experience and drama.

Let's look at another example, also from Michelangelo. This one is a work of sculpture. We think of Michelangelo for his great paintings but he would have described himself first and foremost as a sculptor, and Michelangelo's "Moses" (c. 1515) is a good example of this quality. This is a massive marble statue that he produced for the crypt of one of the popes that commissioned this particular work of art. This is in the Vatican in Rome and is part of a much larger sculptural project.

It's a very impressive statue. I want to start from the top and work our way down and see what we can find about this that will point us to this dramatic quality Renaissance artists such as Michelangelo are building into their work. As we go through this, I want you to try to figure out what moment in the life of Moses Michelangelo is depicting. And if we can identify that, then we will put our finger on the dramatic moment that he is trying to capture. Let's start at the top.

The face of Moses presents a pretty stern aspect. I think we've even described it as an angry look on his face as he is looking off to the side. If it looks like he has horns on this head, that's because he does have

horns on his head, which certainly adds to the fierceness of his demeanor. What is the reason for that? It's a very long story in the history of art that lies behind that traditional way in which Moses is depicted, and it has to do with a mistranslation in the Vulgate. Going back to the Septuagint, the passage that describes how, when Moses came down from Mount Sinai, he was radiating the glory of God in his countenance ended up getting garbled to read he had horns on his head. This thus became the iconic way to depict Moses within the tradition of Christian art.



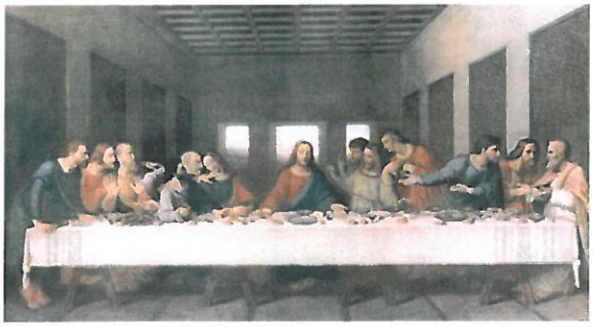
It certainly adds to the effect here. Now, let's look at his body. Look at the size of his arms. This is one muscular figure. And in fact this is how Michelangelo sculpted and painted everything that he did. He himself was a very large man, and so he painted and sculpted everyone that he painted this way. His women are big massive amazons and certainly here Moses is very strong. It's always been noticed that his female characters are very muscular, very masculine, and as great an artist as he was that was the one area that he had a difficulty: bringing that sense of realism to the female form. But here it really serves him well to bring this muscularity into the form of Moses. What is tucked under his right arm? Well, he's got the tablets of stone, so let's start to put the picture together. He is looking off in the distance, he is seated, he has the tablets of stone under his arm. Now look at his legs and his feet. The right foot is firmly planted. The left foot however as you can see is beginning to press down for leverage and pressing himself up. He is in the process of getting ready to stand. So he is looking at something, he is angry, he has got the tablets of stone, he is getting ready to stand and he is about to do something very dramatic. What does he see in a distance?

He sees the Children of Israel dancing around the golden calf that they made. They have fallen into idolatry while he was on Mount Sinai. The anger is welling up inside him. All of that drama comes into play as you reconstruct where this falls in the story of Moses. And all that drama, all that energy, life and vitality, is chiseled into the form, which is very different from that kind of static, dead, mannequin quality that we saw in medieval art. This is what motivates them, this is what they are inspired by. Where do they get this inspiration from? From the ancient Greeks. Think of those statues of athletes that we looked at. Think of the discus-thrower, who is also about to do something very dramatic: hurl that discus. Here Moses is ready to hurl these tablets. They are very similar kinds of depiction.

One more thing to notice is which foot is moving. It's the left foot. Remember what we said about that. You go all the way back five thousand years, and in Egyptian art it's always the left foot that moves. You see that in the Egyptian forms, you see that in the Greek forms they copied from the Egyptians: the left foot is always the one that slightly advances. Here Michelangelo is copying that classical tradition by putting

the movement in the left foot. It's never been satisfactorily explained why it's the left foot that's moving, especially given the bias in favor of right-handedness that we see in culture.

Let me give you one final example here before we move on, the very, very famous painting by Leonardo da Vinci: "The Last Supper" (1498). (See Color Illustration P.) Look at the illustration here of *The Last Supper*. Christ in the center, with six disciples on the left and six disciples on the right. It looks like a very tranquil and static scene to you and me, but as you begin to look at the disciples you realize there is a lot of activity going on.



They are looking at one another, they are questioning, they're talking, they are gesturing. Da Vinci went back to the gospel narrative to reinterpret this scene that has been painted traditionally for hundreds of years in a very static way. He wanted to do something new with the story. He went back to the gospel narrative and what caught his eye was the moment when Jesus said to His disciples in the upper room, "One of you will betray Me." That's the dramatic moment that he is trying to capture, and the disciples are turning to one another and saying, "Is it I Lord?" and they are questioning one another. And so the room is filled with that kind of drama and characteristically that's what da Vinci is interested in trying to portray.

Notice how for each one of these points we've seen that the Renaissance painters are getting their inspiration from the ancient Greeks, the classical tradition. They start getting the themes and subject matter and the values from the classical times as we noted. The high value they placed on the individual is something that they also see in the Greco-Roman period, as is this sense of drama and intensity in art.

The Development of Perspective

The fourth point is the most technical. We see the development of realistic perspective in Renaissance art. That quality of realism that you and I take for granted when we look at a painting is something that artists in the fifteenth century figured out on the basis of mathematical principles and so on as they scientifically tried to understand the way in which we optically comprehend the world and then to translate that into visual form. They came up with certain principles of perspective that defined Renaissance art.

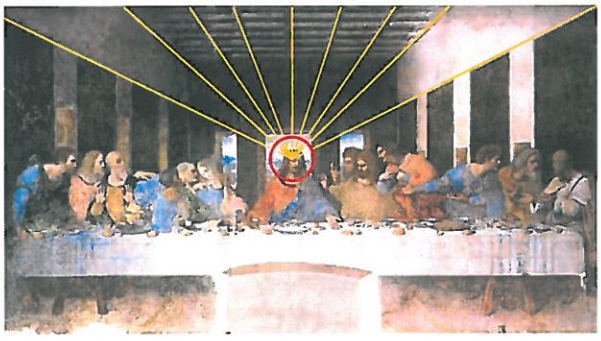
We are going to identify two types of perspective and both of these are going to be illustrated by this very important early Renaissance work, "The Tribute Money" by Masaccio, dated around 1425. (See Color Illustration D.) It's a painting that we have looked at once before when we talked about Roman art and the style of continuous narrative. We are now going to use this to illustrate something entirely different. We are going to look at the principle of perspective as it's emerging in early Renaissance art. To recall the subject matter, Jesus is here confronted in the center by the scribes and Pharisees and the question is asked whether it is lawful to pay tribute to Caesar? On the left side of the painting we see Peter getting a coin from the fish's mouth and then delivering that on the right side of the painting to the tax collector. That's that Roman principle of continuous narrative. You've got three separate scenes layered in one particular painting and if you

don't realize that it becomes a very confusing painting to try to figure out. It's almost like three separate frames in a comic strip.

Let's focus on the element of perspective. You could divide this painting right in half and illustrate the two types of perspective, one on the left hand and one on the right hand. It's almost like Masaccio was deliberately painting this to showcase these new principles of perspective. Let's define what they are. On the left side of the painting we see first of all the principle of atmospheric perspective. The principle of **atmospheric perspective** is a known optical phenomenon. We experience it every single day. Atmospheric perspective relates to the fact that distant objects appear smaller and less clear than objects that are close. You go out at night, you look up at the sky, you see the moon and you can take your hand and you can cover up the moon. Now we know that our hand is not bigger than the moon, we know that it's the great distance that makes it appear small. And similarly you look at the mountains and they are scaled in keeping with a distance and so it's an optical phenomenon of how we view the world.

On the left side of the painting we see atmospheric perspective in the distant mountains. They are scaled according to size and they're less distinct and less clear. Now let's briefly mention how different perspective is in medieval art. Look again at the Virgin Mary. She is not several times bigger than anyone else in this painting because she's close and everyone else is far away, as the scientific optical approach would give us. Rather, she is bigger because she is more important. So it's a completely different basis on which medieval art is functioning. It is not a scientific basis, but with the rise of scientific thinking and out of the Renaissance they are starting to look at the world with these optical principles in mind, and da Vinci is a good example. He is a scientist as well as an artist. He is trying to understand through art the way the world actually is and the way we understand art and then trying to represent that accurately and scientifically in the painting. So that's why we see in Masaccio's painting the world realistically represented with these principles.

Now the second type of perspective is seen on the right side of the painting, and this is what we call linear perspective. Again, it's a known optical phenomenon; it's based on mathematical formulas that were discovered in the fifteenth century, so it has a basis in scientific discovery. **Linear perspective** is the use of straight lines to create the illusion of three-dimensionality. Notice what you have on the right side of the painting. You have a building. Now if you go back to the gospel account of this story, you are not going to find that the building factors into the story. There is no reason for a building to be in this painting except that it gives the straight lines that Masaccio needs to showcase this new technique of linear perspective. You've got the straight lines up here in the top of the building. The straight lines in the steps down here, notice how these are all at a diagonal and they're all emerging at the head of Christ. There is a tunneling effect that gives you that illusion, just as when you stand in a long hallway. The straight lines in the floor where the wall and the floor meet, and the straight lines where the ceiling when the wall meet, tunnel inward. That's the illusion that creates that sense of distance and depth. It's almost like you could walk into that scene, like you could walk down that hall. That's what Renaissance artists are trying to create here. And so as you look at Renaissance paintings note that they always put buildings in their paintings whether they belong or not because again they give you the convenience of a lot of straight lines, which will give you that feeling of three dimensionality.



Let's look at Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper* once again with that in mind. Notice how in the ceiling you have all of these straight lines, and if you take a ruler and follow them they emerge at the head of Christ.

So it's highly significant: da Vinci is saying that at this moment in time, in this moment in history, all the lines of history in a sense are converging at that place where the crown of thorns is going to be placed, just as the lines of this room emerge at that vanishing point. So it becomes a very profound kind of theological statement that da Vinci is making as he uses this new technique of linear perspective to support and convey the doctrinal message that he wants to communicate with this painting.

Finally, we'll consider an early da Vinci painting that does something very similar. This is a da Vinci painting on a very traditional theme done early in his career, when he is a young man of probably about twenty years old, in 1472, and it's called "The Annunciation." (See Color Illustration Q.) The angel Gabriel is announcing to Mary that she is with child. So it looks like a very traditional painting until you realize that it's also using this new technique of linear perspective.

Let's isolate this and see what's going on. There are three terms I want to very quickly introduce to you by way of using this painting. Da Vinci is showcasing all these techniques by superimposing these lines. We can see what those techniques are. The first point that's very important in perspective as Renaissance masters employed is the **horizon line**. As we walk around the world we're not aware of this, but the horizon is how we orient ourselves. The horizon line is very important to orient where you're at. We just do this naturally and intuitively, but Renaissance artists turned that into a methodology and the horizon line is very, very significant. And so, as you look off into the distance, this line that runs right through here is the first principle of construction that we see. Interestingly, note where that horizon line runs. All of these things are very deliberate, very significant. It runs through the head of the angel Gabriel and through the heart of the Virgin Mary. It's like this message that's been given to her comes from the mind of God into the heart of Mary. And again, da Vinci knows exactly what he is doing. The second set of lines that's important are the diagonal lines known as **orthogonal lines**, and these are the straight lines that the building gives you. If you follow those out you notice they meet in a distance at the **vanishing point**, which is the third point. When you find the vanishing point, you've found the heart of the Renaissance painting.

Well, where is that vanishing point in this painting? Again, da Vinci knows what he is doing. We see a mountain in the distance right here. The straight lines are emerging at that mountain. What is that mountain? Scholars believe what he is depicting there is Calvary. And so suddenly again the theology comes richly into focus here because even though da Vinci is portraying the Annunciation, he is already looking ahead to why Christ is coming to earth. The whole purpose is so that in the future, in the distance, all of those lines will merge at Calvary.

So as you begin to take these paintings apart and look at them and analyze them, this is how we interpret them; but in order to do that well, we've got to understand what the Renaissance painters are striving after, what they're trying to accomplish, what the values that are motivating them. As we do this, we realize that these are the values that have shaped the modern age—and this is why we can describe the Renaissance as the "portal" to our own time.