

The Renaissance

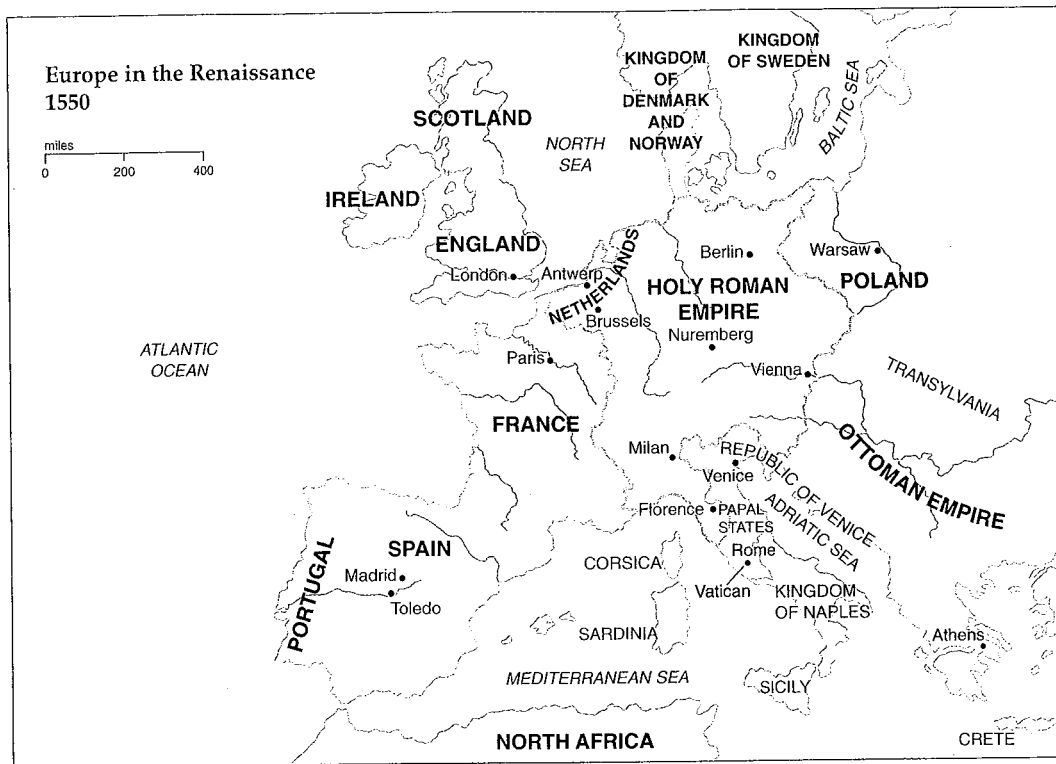
Throughout the Middle Ages, painters were considered skilled crafts workers on a level with goldsmiths, carpenters, and other tradespeople. By the mid-16th century, in contrast, Michelangelo could claim that "in Italy great princes as such are not held in honor or renown; it is a painter that they call divine."¹ From anonymous crafts workers to divinely talented individuals more honored and renowned than princes—what had happened?

The simplest answer is that Michelangelo lived and worked during the time that we call the Renaissance. Covering the period roughly from 1400 to 1600, the Renaissance brought vast changes to the world of art. The way art looked, the subjects it treated, the way it was thought about, the position of the artist in society, the identities and influence of patrons, the cultures that served as points of reference—all these things changed. We might even say that the Renaissance was the time when the concept of "art" arose, for it was during these centuries that painting, sculpture, and architecture began to earn their privileged positions in Western thought.

The word *renaissance* means "rebirth," and it refers to the revival of interest in ancient Greek and Roman culture that is one of the key characteristics of the period. Scholars of the day worked to recover and study as many Greek and Latin texts as possible. Referring to themselves as humanists, they believed that a sound education should include not only the teachings of the Church and the study of early Christian writers but also the study of the liberal arts—grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history, politics, and moral philosophy—about which the pre-Christian world had much to teach.

Renaissance humanists believed in the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. Above all, they held that humankind was not worthless in the eyes of God, as the Church had taught during the Middle Ages. Rather, humankind was God's finest and most perfect creation. Reason and creativity were God's gifts, proof of humankind's inherent dignity. People's obligation to God was thus not to tremble and submit but, rather, to soar, striving to realize their full intellectual and creative potential.

The implications of these ideas for art were tremendous. Artists became newly interested in observing the natural world, and they worked to reproduce it as accurately as possible. Studying the effects of light, they developed the technique of *chiaroscuro*; noting that distant objects appeared smaller than near ones, they developed the system of linear perspective; seeing how detail and color blurred with distance, they developed the principles of atmospheric perspective.



The nude reappeared in art, for the body was held to be the noblest of God's creations. "Who is so barbarous as not to understand that the foot of a man is nobler than his shoe," said Michelangelo, "and his skin nobler than that of the sheep with which he is clothed?"² To portray the body with understanding, artists studied anatomy, even going so far as to dissect cadavers.

Under the influence of the ancient Greek philosopher Plato, whose works were newly available, beauty became equated with moral goodness. Renaissance artists sought an idealized beauty, one they created by taking the most beautiful features of numerous examples and combining them. "Be on the watch to take the best parts of many individual faces," wrote Leonardo da Vinci.³ And the German Renaissance painter Dürer advised the same: "You, therefore, if you desire to compose a fine figure, must take the head from some, the chest, arm, leg, hand, and foot from others. . . . For from many beautiful things something good may be gathered, even as honey is gathered from many flowers."⁴

The ten-volume treatise on architecture by the Roman writer Vitruvius was read avidly in an attempt to understand Classical thought and practice, including ideas about beauty and harmonious proportions. Greek and Roman ruins still standing were studied in detail—described, measured, analyzed, and drawn. Excavations revealed still more examples, along with astonishing statues such as the *Laocoön Group* (see 14.29), which served as an inspiration and ideal for Renaissance artists.

Perspective and chiaroscuro, close observation of nature, the study of anatomy, theories of beauty and proportion—these established painting, sculpture, and architecture as intellectual activities allied with mathematics, science, and poetry. Artists were no longer mere crafts workers, but learned persons whose creative powers were viewed as almost miraculous. The greatest artists were considered a breed apart, constituting a class of their own that transcended the social class determined by birth—not nobility, not bourgeoisie, not clergy, but a separate and elite category of people respected not because of who they were but because of what they could do. They lived in

the courts of the nobles and the popes, they moved freely in good society, their company was sought after, their services in demand.

The character of art patronage reflected the changing times. Before the Renaissance, only two groups of people could afford to be art patrons—the nobility and the clergy. Both continued to be active sponsors of art, but they were joined in the 15th century by a new class of merchant-rulers, very rich, socially ambitious, fully able to support extravagant spending on art. The climate could not have been more fertile for a flowering of art: The best artists were available, and virtually unlimited funds existed to support them. With this preamble, then, let us look at the artists of the Renaissance.

The Early and High Renaissance in Italy

Why did the Renaissance begin in Italy and not elsewhere? Scholars have offered many reasons. First, Italy had been among the first areas to recover economically from the chaos of the early Middle Ages. Powerful city-states engaged in extensive trade and banking had developed. Wealthy, independent, and fiercely competitive, the city-states would vie with one another to engage the finest artists, as would the merchant-princes whose fortunes sustained them. The Church, also an important patron of the arts, was centered in Italy as well. Humanism arose first in Italy, and it was in Italy that the first university position in Greek studies was established. Finally, Italians had long lived amid the ruins of ancient Rome, and they viewed themselves as the direct descendants of the citizens of the earlier civilization. If anyone could bring back its glories, surely it was they.

Among the first generation of Renaissance artists, the finest sculptor by far was Donatello. His statue of *Saint Mark* (16.1), an early work, shows the characteristics of this new era, especially if we compare it with the statue of Saint Theodore from Chartres Cathedral, carved during the High Middle Ages (see 15.22). Whereas Gothic sculptors carved what they observed from the surface—face, clothing, limbs—Donatello thought methodically in the new way: The body provides the framework on which the fabric drapes, and therefore it must be considered first. Renaissance sculptors often created a full-scale model of a nude figure in clay, then draped clay-soaked linen about it to create garments, arranging the folds before the fabric dried. This model was then copied in marble. Scholars believe that Donatello was one of the first sculptors to use this method.

The statue is placed in a niche, but unlike most architectural sculptures from the Middle Ages, it does not depend on this framework for support. Rather, the fully rounded figure stands independently in true contrapposto, the weight on the right leg, left leg bent. The shoulders compensate: right shoulder lower, left shoulder higher. The clothing responds to the form underneath. Where the left knee bends outward, the robe falls back; where the right arm is pressed to the body, the sleeve wrinkles. We sense that if St. Mark moved, the garments would move with him. The figure is as naturalistic as any ancient Greek statue, yet there is a stamp of individual personality in both face and body that may have come from Donatello's reading of Mark's Gospel.

Donatello's teacher was an artist named Lorenzo Ghiberti, who had established his reputation in 1401 by winning a competition to design a set of bronze relief sculptures for the doors of the baptistry of the cathedral in his native town of Florence. In 1425 a second set of doors was commissioned from Ghiberti. In between those two dates, the system of linear perspective had been discovered, described, and published. Ghiberti took full advantage of the possibilities opened up by the new discovery, as we can see in *The*



16.1 Donatello. *St. Mark*. 1411–13. Marble, height 7'9". Or San Michele, Florence.

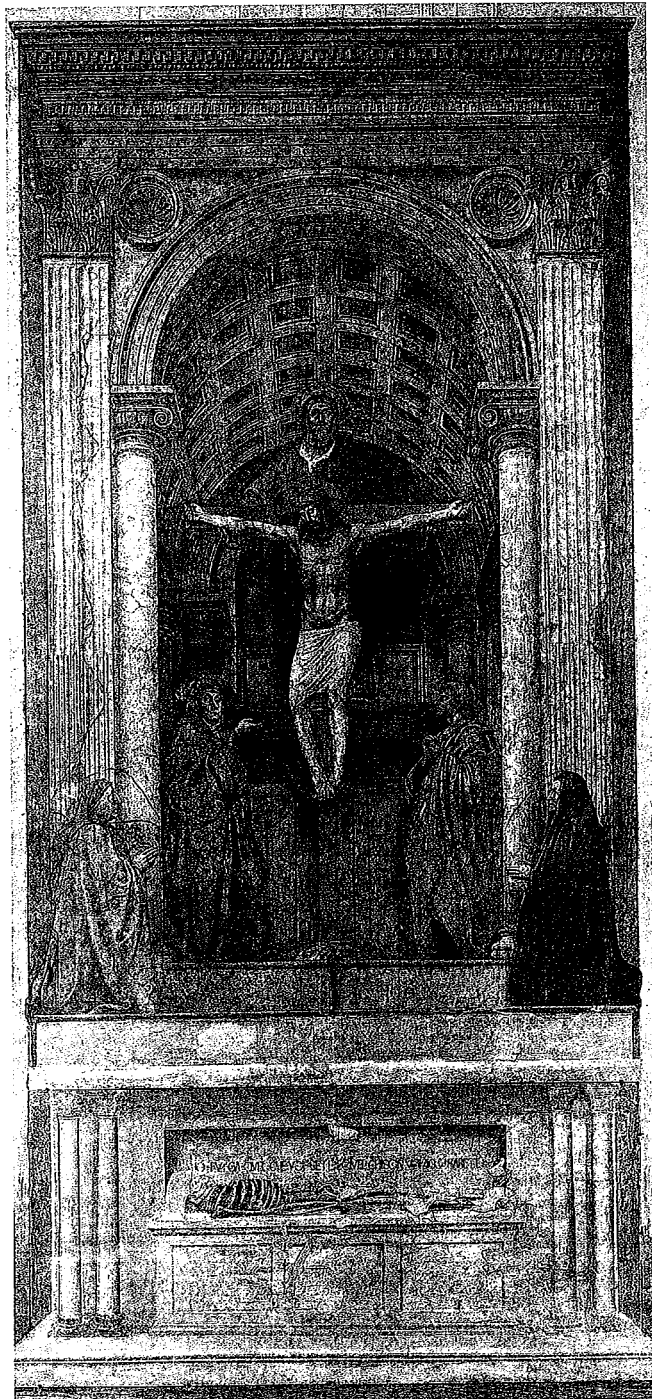
RELATED WORKS



5.28 Alberti,
Sant'Andrea

Story of Jacob and Esau (16.2), one of the ten panels he executed for this second set of doors. The graceful, rounded figures in the foreground stand on a pavement whose converging lines begin a recession in space that is carried systematically through the architectural setting sculpted in low relief in the background. Renaissance artists used this new, rationally conceived space to bring clarity and order to their compositions, two qualities that Greek philosophy associated with beauty.

Artists had long used architectural settings to structure their compositions. Ghiberti's great innovation was to conceive of the architecture and the figures on the same scale instead of relying on the miniaturized, symbolic architecture of earlier artists such as Duccio (see 15.25). Ghiberti quite rightly boasted of this in his *Commentaries*. "I executed this work with the most painstaking and loving care," he wrote, ". . . with the buildings drawn with the same proportions as they would appear to the eye and so true that,



16.2 (right) Lorenzo Ghiberti. *The Story of Jacob and Esau*, from *The Gates of Paradise*. c. 1435. Gilt bronze, 31¼" square. Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Florence.

16.3 (left) Masaccio. *Trinity with the Virgin, St. John the Evangelist, and Donors*. 1425. Fresco, 21'9" × 9'4". Santa Maria Novella, Florence.

Classical culture and its relationship to Christianity. The reconciliation of these two systems of thought gave rise to a philosophy known as Neo-Platonism, after the Greek philosopher Plato.

Venus was the Roman goddess of love and beauty. According to legend, she was born from the sea, and so Botticelli depicts her on a floating shell. The wind god Zephyr and his wife blow her gently toward the shore, where a figure representing spring waits ready to clothe Venus in a flowing garment. Botticelli paints the goddess in the nude, with strategically placed hands and a tress of hair the only concessions to modesty. Such a large-scale depiction of the female nude in art had been virtually unknown since Classical times. Venus' pose is modeled after a Roman sculpture of the goddess, which Botticelli had studied in the Medici collection, but her lightness, her fragile quality, her delicate beauty and billowing hair—these are Botticelli's own.

Although Botticelli's unusual linear style and shallow modeling was an exception to Renaissance norms, it was highly appreciated by the Medici circle. Venus, for example, looks as though she might be modeled in high relief, but not fully rounded. The implied space is shallow, with the sea and receding shoreline serving almost as a flat backdrop, as in a theatrical production. Medici intimates would also have understood the subtle Neo-Platonic overtones of the scene. In Neo-Platonic thought, Venus was identified with both Eve and the Virgin Mary; her birth from the water was related to the baptism of Christ by John the Baptist. Botticelli's work displays the rarefied and learned side of Renaissance art. It was painted not for a large public but for a cultivated audience of initiates.

We come now to a period known as the High Renaissance—a brief but glorious time in the history of art. In barely twenty-five years, from shortly before 1500 to about 1520, some of the most celebrated works of Western art were produced. Many artists participated in this brilliant creative endeavor, but the outstanding figures among them were unquestionably Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo.

The term "Renaissance man" is applied to someone who is very well informed about, or very good at doing, many different, often quite unrelated, things. It originated in the fact that several of the leading figures of the Renaissance were artistic jacks-of-all-trades. Michelangelo was a painter, sculptor, poet, architect—incomparably gifted at all. Leonardo was a painter, inventor, sculptor, architect, engineer, scientist, musician, and all-round intellectual. In our age of specialization, those accomplishments seem staggering, but during the heady years of the Renaissance nothing was impossible.

Leonardo is the artist who most embodies the term "Renaissance man"; many people consider him to have been the greatest genius who ever lived. Leonardo was possessed of a brilliant and inquiring mind that accepted no limits. Throughout his long life he remained absorbed by the problem of how things work, and how they might work. A typical example of his investigations is the well-known *Study of Human Proportions* (see 5.21), in which the artist sought to establish ideal proportions for the human body by relating it to the square and the circle. Above and below the figure is Leonardo's eccentric mirror writing, which he used in his notes and journals.

Leonardo's interest in mathematics is also evident from his careful rendering of perspective. In Chapter 4, we examined his masterpiece *The Last Supper* (see 4.45), which uses one-point linear perspective to organize the many figures in the composition and set them into deep space. Yet another interest, experimental painting techniques, served the artist less well in *The Last Supper*. Rather than employing the established fresco method, Leonardo worked in a medium he devised for the *Last Supper* project, thus dooming his work to centuries of restoration (p. 107).

In spite of his vast accomplishments, Leonardo often had difficulty completing specific projects. Many of his most ambitious works were left unfinished, including this lovely painting of the *Madonna and Child with Saint*

RELATED WORKS



2.4
Leonardo,
Mona Lisa



2.10 Bellini, *Pietà*



4.20
Leonardo,
*Virgin and
St. Anne*



4.45 Leonardo, *Last Supper*

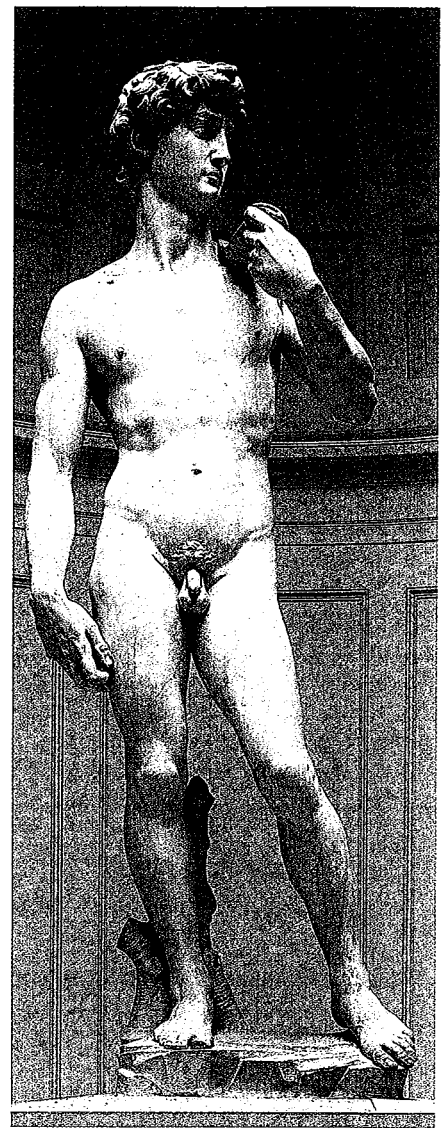


5.21
Leonardo,
*Study of
Human
Proportions*



16.7 (left) Leonardo da Vinci. *Madonna and Child with Saint Anne*. c. 1503–06. Oil on wood, 5'6½" × 3'8". Musée du Louvre, Paris.

16.8 (right) Michelangelo. *David*. 1501–04. Marble, height 18'. Galleria dell'Accademia, Florence.



Anne (16.7). Leonardo has arranged his figures in a triangular grouping by having the Virgin Mary, a grown woman, sit rather improbably on the lap of her mother, Saint Anne. As so often with Leonardo, the composition is not meant to be realistic but, rather, to suggest theological meanings. The three figures form a single unit because they are a single lineage. Looking at the image, our gaze falls across the generations, from Saint Anne to her daughter Mary to Mary's son Jesus. Jesus attempts to climb onto a lamb, a symbol of his future sacrifice. (The lamb was a sacrificial animal, and Jesus is thus referred to as the Lamb of God.) He exchanges a look with his mother, as though both know what his destiny holds. She tenderly holds him back, as if to say, "Yes, soon enough, but not yet." Leonardo destabilizes his triangular grouping by plunging the lower left corner into darkness, then restores the balance by placing a dark tree at the upper right, an allusion to the cross on which Jesus will die. In the background is an uninhabited, primal landscape of rocks and water, suggesting perhaps the creation of the world and the beginning of time. The entire scene is bathed in the gentle light of *sfumato* (derived from the Italian for "smoke"), Leonardo's specialty, in which layer upon layer of translucent glazes produce a hazy atmosphere, softened contours, and velvet shadows.

Leonardo was based in Florence at the time he painted *Madonna and Child with Saint Anne*. Living there as well was Michelangelo, a quarter-century younger yet already thought of as Leonardo's rival in greatness. Michelangelo had established his reputation as a sculptor by the age of

twenty-five. A year later he received the commission for a colossal image of the biblical hero David (16.8), the young Hebrew shepherd who killed the giant Goliath with a single stone from his slingshot. The *David* statue reveals Michelangelo's debt to Classical sculptures. *David* is not, however, a simple restatement of Greek art. The Greeks knew how bodies looked on the outside. Michelangelo knew how they looked on the inside, how they worked, because he had studied human anatomy and had dissected corpses. He translated this knowledge into a figure that seems made of muscle and flesh and bone, though all in marble.

There are other characteristics that make *David* a Renaissance sculpture, not a copy of a Greek one. For one thing, it has a tension and an energy that are missing from Greek art. Hellenistic works such as the *Laocoön Group* (see 14.29) expressed these qualities through physical contortions, but to have this energy coiled within a figure standing quietly was new. *David* is not so much standing in repose as standing in readiness. Another Renaissance quality is the expression on *David's* face. Classical Greek statues tended to have calm and even vacant expressions. But *David* is young and vibrant—and angry, angry at the forces of evil represented by the giant Goliath. Contemporary Florentines found *David* a fitting emblem for their small but proud city, which had recently battled giants by expelling the ruling Medici family and then founding a republic. They placed the statue in the city square in front of the seat of the new government. (It has since been moved indoors.)

Not long after completing the *David*, Michelangelo embarked on the masterpiece that has become his best-known work, the ceiling frescoes of the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican, in Rome (16.9). He had been called to Rome by Pope Julius II, who wanted the artist to design his tomb, a large monument with numerous sculptures. Michelangelo set to work, but a year later Julius abandoned that project and proposed instead to use the artist's skills as a painter. Michelangelo, whose distaste for painting is well documented, resisted the plan, but in the end he was forced to capitulate. For the next four years, he would spend most of his waking hours on a scaffold 68 feet above the floor.

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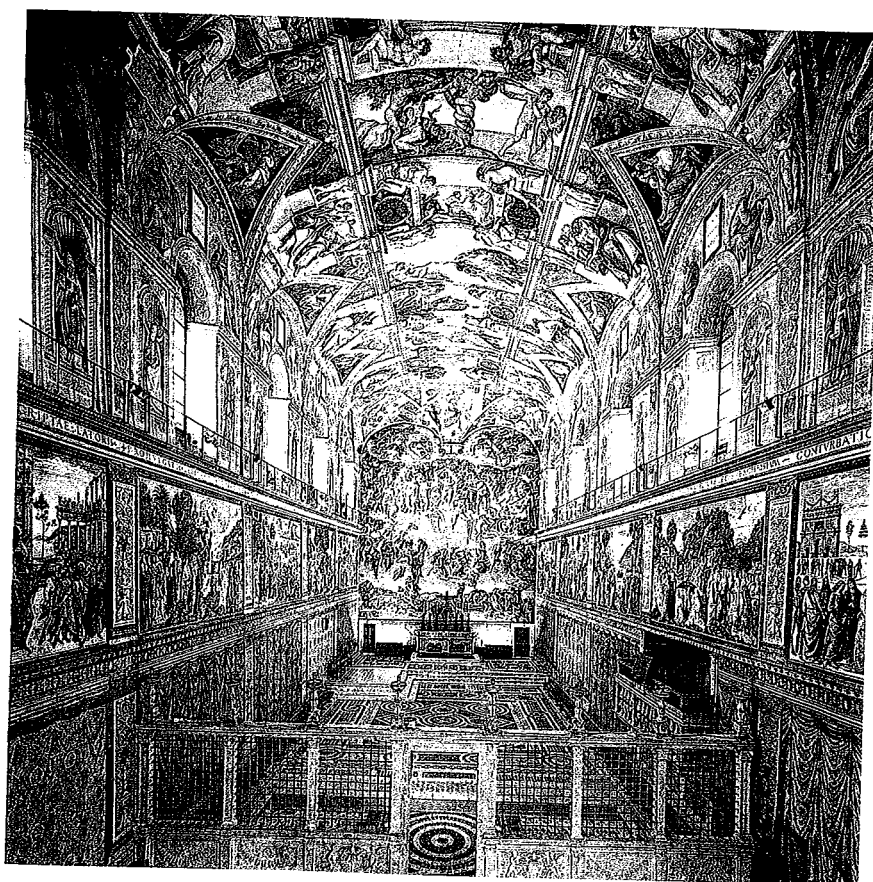


11.22
Michelangelo,
Dying Slave



2.6
Verrocchio,
David

16.9 Interior, Sistine Chapel, Vatican, Rome. 1473–80.



The Sistine Chapel, named after an earlier pope called Sixtus, has a high vaulted ceiling 128 feet long and 44 feet wide. Julius required that Michelangelo cover this entire expanse, 700 square yards, with a painted decoration based on religious themes. Fresco was the only practical medium, and the difficulties of this technique are considerable (Chapter 7). Paint must be applied to fresh plaster just when it has the proper degree of dampness; only a small area can be covered at a time; and the painting must be done directly, with no allowance for correction of mistakes. For this project the artist had to work in a cramped position, with paint and plaster continually dripping in his face. So situated, he was only inches away from the working surface, yet the paintings had to be readable and compelling to a viewer standing on the floor, nearly 70 feet below.

Even more overwhelming than the physical constraints was the challenge of making a coherent composition in such a huge area. To tame the vast expanse of the ceiling vault, Michelangelo invented an illusionistic architecture (16.10). Painted to look like stone, its lintels, cornices, pedestals, and supporting sculptural figures create a large grid that divides the surface into discrete zones. In the niches thus created along the sides, Michelangelo portrayed Old Testament prophets and ancient Greek sybils—women gifted with prophecy. All were believed to have predicted the coming of Christ. Along the central spine of the ceiling, the painted architecture frames a series of nine pictorial spaces. Here, Michelangelo depicted scenes from Genesis, from the creation of the world through the story of Noah and the Flood. The detail of the ceiling illustrated here shows, from bottom to top: God, his hands outstretched, his cloak billowing, looking down at the earth as he separates the waters from the dry land; the creation of Adam, with the dynamic figure of God about to pass the spark of life to the languid first man; and God creating Eve as Adam slumbers. The Genesis scenes alternate rhythmically

16.10 Michelangelo. Sistine Chapel ceiling, detail showing, from bottom to top: *God Dividing the Waters from the Dry Land*, with the *Persian Sybil* (left) and *Daniel* (right); *The Creation of Adam*; *The Creation of Eve*, with *Ezekiel* (left) and the *Cumaeen Sybil* (right). 1508–12. Fresco.



ARTISTS Michelangelo (1475–1564)



What are the benefits and the constraints of having patrons? How does Michelangelo depict the human figure through sculpture? Why the human body as a subject of intense study?

He is beyond legend. His name means “archangel Michael,” and to his contemporaries and those who came after, his stature is scarcely less than that of a heavenly being. He began serious work as an artist at the age of thirteen and did not stop until death claimed him seventy-six years later. His equal may never be seen again, for only a particular time and place could have bred the genius of Michelangelo.

Michelangelo Buonarroti was born in the Tuscan town of Caprese. According to his devoted biographer and friend, Giorgio Vasari, the young Michelangelo often was scolded and beaten by his father for spending too much time drawing. Eventually, however, seeing his son's talent, the father relented and apprenticed him to the painter Domenico Ghirlandaio. At the age of fourteen, Michelangelo was welcomed into the household of the wealthy banker Lorenzo de' Medici, who operated a private sculpture academy for promising young students. There he remained until Lorenzo's death, after which Michelangelo, just seventeen years old, struck out permanently on his own.

He traveled to Venice and Bologna, to Florence, then finally to Rome, where he attracted the first of what would become a long list of patrons among the clergy. A *Pietà* (Virgin mourning the dead Christ) made in 1500 and now in St. Peter's established his reputation as a sculptor. Within a dozen years after that, he had completed the two works most closely associated with his name: the *David* statue and the ceiling frescoes in the Sistine Chapel.

From his teen years until his death, Michelangelo never lacked for highly placed patrons. He served—and survived—six popes, and in between accepted commissions from two emperors, a king, and numerous members of the nobility. All his life he struggled to keep a balance between the work he wanted to do and the work demanded of him by his benefactors. His relationships with these powerful figures were often stormy, marked by squabbles about payment, insults given and forgiven, flight from the scene followed by penitent return.

Michelangelo served these masters, at various times, as painter and architect, but he considered himself above all to be a sculptor. Much of his time was spent supervising the quarrying of superior stones for sculptural projects. His greatest genius lay in depictions of the human figure, whether in marble or in paint. Vasari writes that “this extraordinary man chose always to refuse to paint anything save the human body in its most beautifully proportioned and perfect forms.” To that end, Michelangelo made extensive anatomical studies and dissected corpses to better understand the inner workings of the body.

Michelangelo formed a number of passionate attachments during his life. These inspired the artist, always a sensitive and gifted poet, to write numerous sonnets. One of his most poignant verses, however, was written as a commentary on his labors up on the scaffold under the Sistine Chapel ceiling. We might find it amusing if it were not so heartfelt:

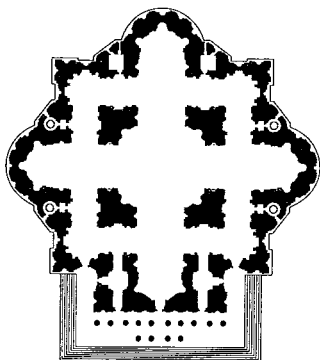
I've grown a goiter by dwelling in this den—
As cats from stagnant streams in Lombardy,
Or in what other land they hap to be—
Which drives the belly close beneath the chin;
My beard turns up to heaven; my nape falls in,
Fixed on my spine; my breast-bone visibly
Grows like a harp: a rich embroidery
Bedews my face from brush-drops thick and
thin. . . .⁶

Workshop of Frans Floris. *Portrait of Michelangelo Buonarroti*. 16th century. Oil on wood, diameter 11¾". Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

16.11 (below, left) Michelangelo.
Saint Peter's Basilica, Vatican.
c. 1546–64 (dome completed 1590 by
Giacomo della Porta).

16.12 (below, top) Plan of St. Peter's.

16.13 (below, right) Raphael.
Pope Leo X with Two Cardinals. c. 1518.
Oil on wood, 5¹³/₈" × 3⁸/₈".
Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.



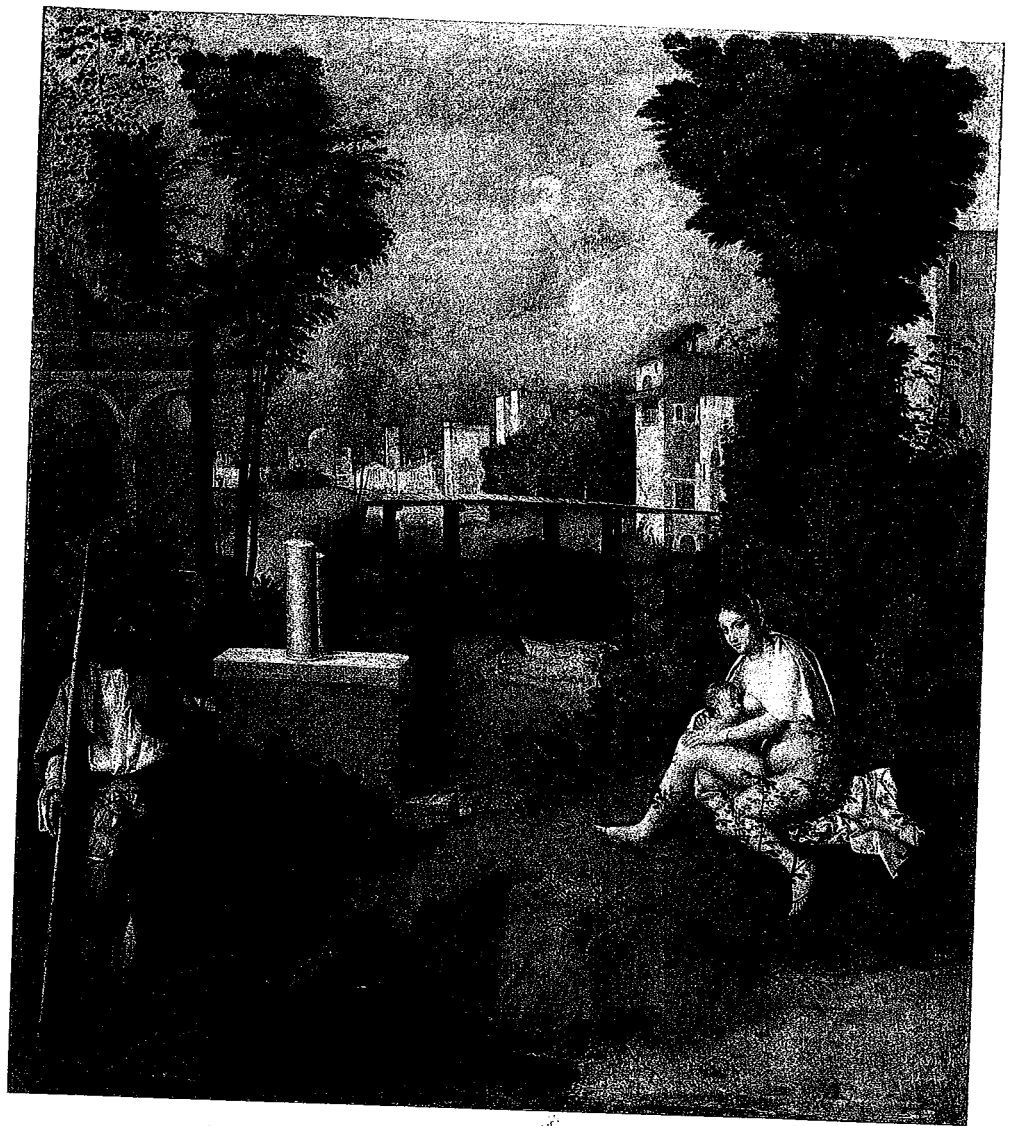
in size across the ceiling—large, small, large, small—creating the effect of a pulse or a heartbeat. The small scenes are framed by four nude youths holding garlands and ribbons that support bronze shields, painted as though decorated with reliefs illustrating still more biblical scenes. The youths are known by the Italian name for them, *ignudi*, and their meaning is much debated. They may be some kind of perfected beings, perhaps even angels.

The ceiling frescoes were an immediate success, and Michelangelo continued as a papal favorite, although his commissions were not always in his preferred line. Just as Pope Julius had urged the sculptor to work as a painter, one of Julius' successors, Pope Paul III, encouraged the sculptor to work as an architect. In 1546 Paul named Michelangelo the official architect of the new St. Peter's, one of the four most important churches in Rome. This structure would be erected on the site of *old* St. Peter's (see 15.2), dating from the Early Christian era in the 4th century. By the time he began work on the project, Michelangelo was an old man, well into his seventies and physically tired, but his creative vigor was undiminished.

Construction on the new church had already begun, based on a plan by an architect named Bramante, who had died in 1514. Michelangelo revised Bramante's plan, gathering its elaborate fussiness into a bold and harmonious design (16.11, 16.12). Central and cross plans here merge in a new idea that relates the powerfully symbolic cross to the geometric forms that Renaissance artists loved, the square and the circle. Michelangelo did not live to see his church finished. The magnificent central dome was completed after his death by another architect, who modified its silhouette. During the 17th century, the nave was lengthened and the facade remodeled. The photograph illustrated here, however, was taken from the rear of the church and shows the building that Michelangelo conceived. An organic whole with pulsating contours and a powerful upward thrust, it is the architectural equivalent of his muscular nudes.

The concentration of artistic energy in Rome during the Renaissance was such that while Michelangelo was working on the Sistine ceiling, his slightly younger rival Raphael was only a few steps away, painting his fresco *The School of Athens* (see 7.3) in the private library of the same pope, Julius





16.14 Giorgione. *The Tempest*.
c. 1505. Oil on canvas, 32¼ × 28¾".
Gallerie dell' Accademia, Venice.

II. In 1513 Julius was succeeded as pope by Giovanni de' Medici, whose family was now back in power in Florence. Raphael was increasingly in demand as a portraitist, and Giovanni de' Medici, now Pope Leo X, commissioned a likeness from him (16.13). Leo X was a passionate collector of books and manuscripts, and he eventually amassed a fine library. Raphael portrays him seated before one of his prized illuminated manuscripts, a magnifying glass in his left hand. Standing beside him are two nephews he had elevated to the office of cardinal (church officials next in rank to the pope). The rich fabrics, sumptuously painted, tell of the worldly splendor of the Church in Rome, while the keenly observed faces convey without flattery the aura of power and ambition that drove Leo X and his family.

After Rome and Florence, the third great artistic center of Italy was Venice, where Giovanni Bellini worked and taught (see 2.10). Bellini's two finest students, Giorgione and Titian, went on to become the greatest Venetian painters of the High Renaissance.

The iconography of Giorgione's painting *The Tempest* (16.14) is unknown. Even the artist's contemporaries seem not to have known what story he was depicting or to have been able to identify the nude woman nursing a child at right and the soldier (or shepherd) at left. Regardless of the meaning of its subject, *The Tempest* makes an important contribution to Renaissance art in the way it is composed. Artists of earlier generations would compose a scene by concentrating on the figures and painting the landscape as a kind of backdrop. Giorgione, however, has started by constructing a landscape and then placing his figures in it. This approach paved the way for the great landscape paintings of the centuries to follow.

RELATED WORKS



4.16 Raphael,
Madonna



7.3 Raphael, *School of Athens*

RELATED WORKS



2.33 Titian,
Assumption



5.31 Titian,
Venus with a Mirror

In *The Tempest*, as the title implies, the subject is really the approaching storm, which closes in dramatically over the city while the two foreground figures are still bathed in sunlight. Giorgione's principal interest seems to have been the contrast of bucolic foreground against the city rendered in careful perspective, with the two drawn together by the violent effects of nature. The storm and the lush vegetation create a world in which nature dominates, not people, and the painting evokes a powerful, compelling mood of apprehension and anticipation.

Giorgione died in his early thirties; thus, we will never know what other wonders he might have accomplished. Titian, however, lived a long and productive life, and his career, like that of Michelangelo, allows us to witness the full arc of a great artist from youth through maturity to old age. We have seen the clarity of Titian's early style in the *Assumption* (see 2.33) and something of the opulence of his middle years in *Venus with a Mirror* (see 5.31). As Titian aged, his brushwork became freer and his colors grew more subdued and burnished. Contemporaries marveled that his paintings, seen up close, seemed nothing but a senseless frenzy of brush strokes. Yet as the viewer stepped back, there came into focus an image of unparalleled richness.

An example is *The Annunciation* (16.15), painted when the artist was seventy-five. The subject is the moment when an angel appears to Mary to tell her that she has been chosen to bear the Son of God. In Titian's imagining of the event, Mary turns quietly from her prayers and lifts her veil to look at her visitor. The angel arrives as though in a hurry, his cheeks still flush with the excitement of the news he brings. Mary does not see that behind her the air itself has opened with the force of an explosion, and from the golden light formed of endless cherubim descends the dove of the Holy Spirit. In this work, Titian produced a vision of heavenly glory as rhapsodic as the gold realm of Byzantium or the stained glass of the Middle Ages.

The Renaissance in the North

In the northern countries of western Europe—Switzerland, Germany, northern France, and the Netherlands—the Renaissance did not happen with the sudden drama that it did in Italy, nor were its concerns quite the same. Northern artists did not live among the ruins of Rome, nor did they share the Italians' sense of a personal link to the creators of the Classical past. Instead of the exciting series of discoveries that make the Italian Renaissance such a good story, the Northern Renaissance style evolved gradually out of the late Middle Ages, as artists became increasingly entranced with the myriad details of the visible world and better and better at capturing them.

We can see this fondness for detail in one of the most famous works of the late Middle Ages, the illuminated prayer book known as *Les Très Riches Heures* ("the very rich hours"). The book was created at the beginning of the 15th century by three artist brothers, the Limbourgs, for the duke of Berry, brother to the king of France.

Meant for daily religious devotion, the *Très Riches Heures* contains a calendar, with each month's painting featuring a typical seasonal activity of either the peasantry or the nobility. Our illustration shows the *February* page (16.16). At top in the lunette (half-moon shape), the chariot of the Sun is shown making its progress through the months and signs of the zodiac. Below, the Limbourgs depict their notion of lower-class life in the year's coldest month.

This view of everyday life focuses on a small peasant hut with its occupants clustered around the fire, their garments pulled back to get maximum benefit from the warmth. With a touch of artistic license, the Limbourgs have removed the front wall of the hut so we can look in. Outside the cozy hut

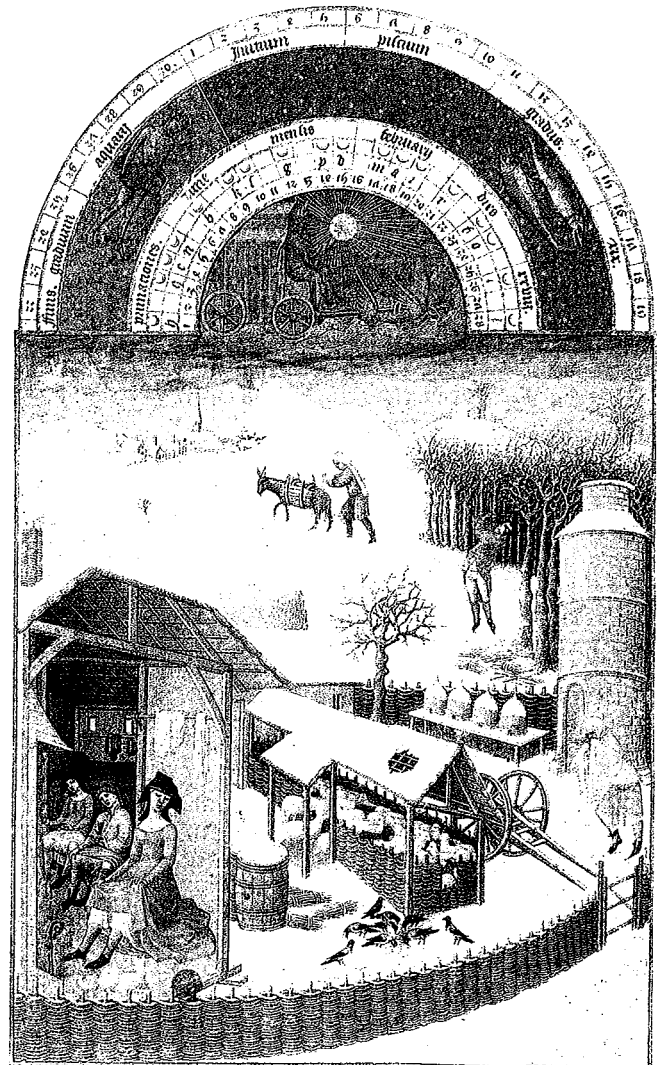
we see what may be the earliest snow-covered landscape in Western art. Sheep cluster in their enclosure, a peasant comes rushing across the barnyard pulling his cloak about his face to keep in the warm breath. From there the movement progresses diagonally up the slope to a man chopping firewood, another urging a donkey uphill, and finally the church at the top.

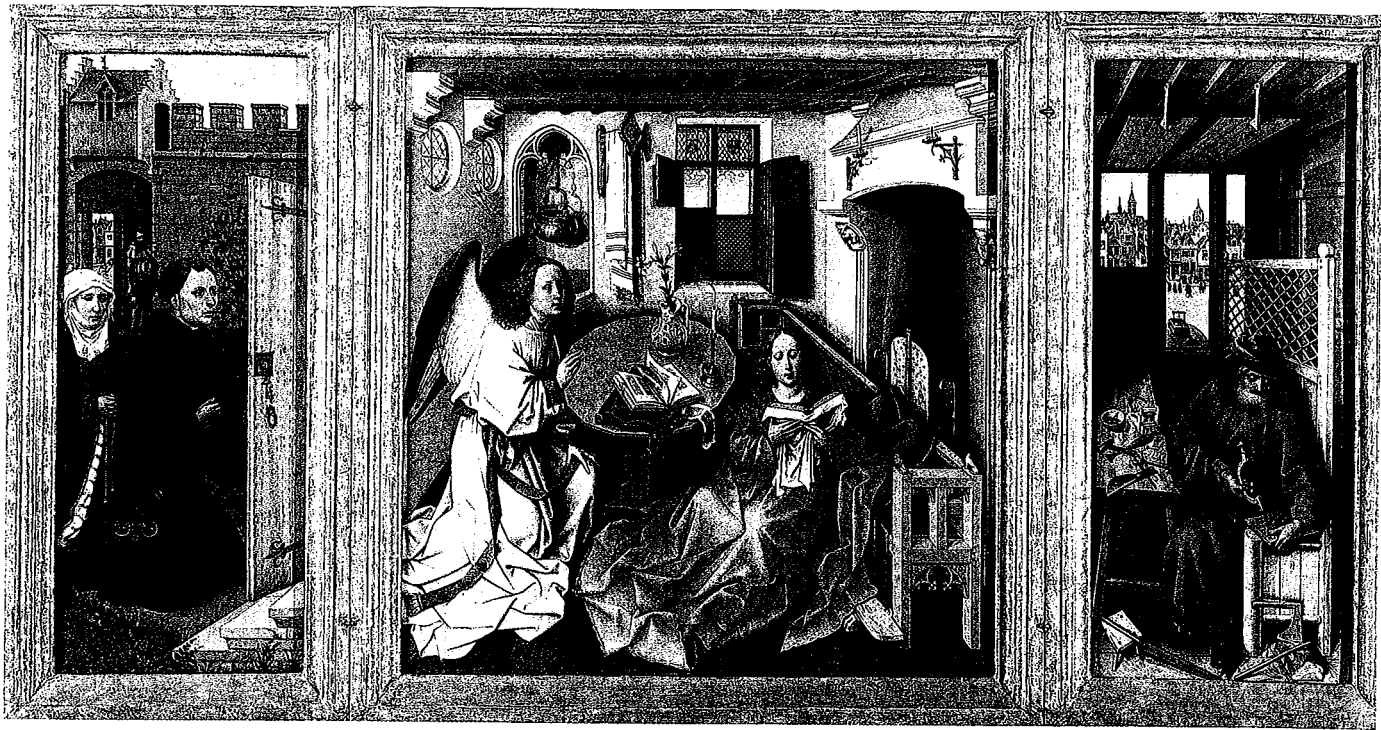
To appreciate the richness of details, we should bear in mind this is a miniature, only 9 inches high. So acute is the Limbourgs' observation, on so tiny a scale, that we understand the condition of each player—the exertion of the woodcutter, the chill of the running figure, the nonchalant poses of the couple in the hut, and the demure modesty of the lady in blue.

The Limbourgs' manuscript marks a high point in a medieval tradition dating back hundreds of years (see 15.12). Within a few decades, however, the printing press would be invented, and the practice of copying and illustrating books by hand would gradually die out. In the meantime, an increasing number of Northern artists were turning to painting on panel with the

16.15 (left) Titian. *The Annunciation*. c. 1560. Oil on canvas, 13'2½" × 7'8½". Chiesa di San Salvador, Venice.

16.16 (right) Limbourg Brothers. February, from *Les Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*. 1416. Illumination, 8" × 5⅜". Musée Condé, Chantilly.





16.17 Robert Campin. *Mérode Altarpiece*. c. 1426. Oil on panel, 25 $\frac{3}{16}$ × 24 $\frac{7}{8}$ " (center), 25 $\frac{3}{8}$ × 10 $\frac{3}{4}$ " (each wing).
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

RELATED WORKS



2.29 Van Eyck, *Arnolfini Double Portrait*



7.7 Van Eyck, *Man in a Red Turban*

newly developed medium of oil paint. An early master of the medium was Robert Campin, a prominent artist in the Flemish city of Tournai, in present-day Belgium. The subject of his *Mérode Altarpiece* (16.17) is the Annunciation, the same event we saw depicted by Titian earlier in this chapter (see 16.15). Campin painted this work in 1426, right around the time that the principles of linear perspective were discovered in Italy. The Italian system would not make its way north for seventy-five more years. Campin relies instead on intuitive perspective, in which receding parallel lines converge unsystematically. He uses it here with charming inconsistency, tilting the tabletops toward us, for example, so we can get a look at everything that sits on them.

The Annunciation setting is replete with symbols, most of them referring to Mary's purity: the lilies on the table, the just-extinguished candle, the white linen, among others. At upper left, between two round windows, the tiny figure of a child carrying a cross flies down a light ray toward Mary's ear, signifying that the infant Jesus will enter Mary's womb through God's will, not through human impregnation. The right wing of the altarpiece shows Joseph, who will become Mary's husband, at work in his carpenter shop. By tradition, Joseph is making a mousetrap, symbolic of the soon-to-come Jesus' "trapping" the Devil, bringing good to banish evil. In the left wing, the donors, who commissioned the painting, kneel to witness the holy scene.

No recitation of this picture's details should overshadow its sheer beauty. Mary's face, modest above her crimson gown, is among the loveliest in all Renaissance art. The angel, with his luminous face and brilliant gold wings, displays an unearthly radiance. Both central figures wear robes that flow into rivers of sculptural folds. The *Mérode Altarpiece* is only about 2 feet in height. Its exquisitely rendered details, its clear colors, and the artist's skillful placement of light and shadow combine to give it a jewel-like quality.

Northern artists' preoccupation with decoration and surface and *things* derives naturally from their heritage. The North had a long tradition of painted miniatures, manuscript illuminations, stained glass, and tapestries—all decorative arts with a great deal of surface detail. Whereas the Italian

masters were obsessed with structure—accurate perspective and the underlying musculature of the body—Northern artists perfected their skill at rendering the precise outer appearance of their subjects. They were unsurpassed at capturing in paint the textures of satin or velvet, the sheen of silver and gold, the quality of skin to its last pore and wrinkle.

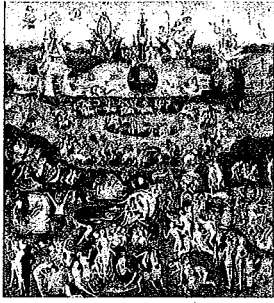
In a fundamental way, Northern paintings are about looking. An apt example is Rogier van der Weyden's *St. Luke Drawing the Virgin* (16.18). At left is the Virgin Mary nursing the infant Jesus. At right is St. Luke, author of one of the four Gospels in the Bible and patron saint of artists, drawing the mother and child in silverpoint. The two larger figures are carefully balanced in an architectural setting, behind which, through a window, we glimpse a landscape in depth. Typical Northern touches include Rogier's minute attention to detail in the room—woodwork, tiles, canopy, window panes; wonderfully lavish drapery in the garments; rich colors; and faces so finely modeled and human we can think of them as portraits. There is great emotional warmth in this picture. The Virgin and the Child exchange tender glances, while St. Luke, in his effort to capture their likeness, seems almost overcome with reverence and love. Everyone in the painting is caught up in looking, including the distant couple gazing out at the horizon.

Although Rogier's painting is gentle, religious art of the Northern Renaissance could also be harsh in its emotionalism—far harsher than that of Italy. Northern art abounds in truly grim Crucifixions, gory martyrdoms of saints, and inventive punishments for sinners. Italian artists did sometimes undertake those subjects, but they never dwelt so fondly on the particulars.

16.18 Rogier van der Weyden. *St. Luke Drawing the Virgin*. c. 1435. Oil and tempera on panel, 4'6 $\frac{1}{8}$ " \times 3'7 $\frac{5}{8}$ ".
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



RELATED WORKS



3.19 Bosch, *Garden of Earthly Delights*



8.8 Dürer, *Saint Jerome*

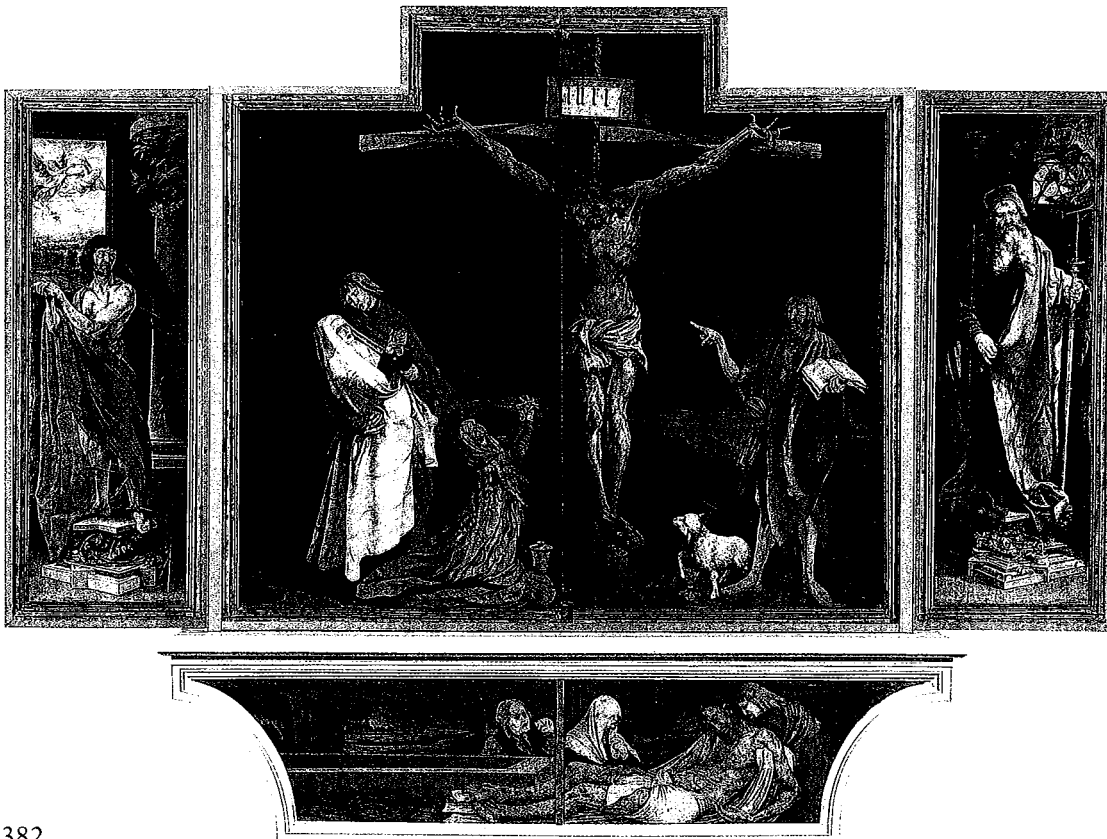
16.19 Matthias Grünewald. *Isenheim Altarpiece* (exterior). 1515. Panel, 8'10" × 10'1".
Musée d'Unterlinden, Colmar.

Matthias Grünewald, a German artist active in the early 16th century, painted the Crucifixion of Christ as the center of his great masterpiece, the *Isenheim Altarpiece* (16.19). Originally, the altarpiece reposed in the chapel of a hospital devoted to the treatment of illnesses afflicting the skin, including syphilis. This setting helps to explain the horrible appearance of Christ's body on the cross—pockmarked, bleeding from numberless wounds, tortured beyond endurance. Without question, the patients in the hospital could identify with Christ's sufferings and thus increase their faith.

In Grünewald's version of the Crucifixion, the twists and lacerations of the body speak of unendurable pain, but the real anguish is conveyed by the feet and hands. Christ's fingers splay out, clutching at the air but helpless to relieve the pain. His feet bend inward in a futile attempt to alleviate the pressure of his hanging body. To the left of the Cross, the Virgin Mary falls in a faint, supported by St. John, and Mary Magdalene weeps in an agony that mirrors Christ's own. To the right, John the Baptist offers the only sign of hope. He points calmly at the dying Savior in a gesture that foreshadows Christ's Resurrection. Grünewald's interpretation of the Crucifixion is in keeping with a stark Northern tradition in which depictions of extreme physical agony were commonplace.

It was Albrecht Dürer (see 8.8) who more than any other artist attempted to fuse Italian ideas and discoveries with the Northern love of meticulous observation. Dürer had visited Italy as a young artist in 1494 and returned for a longer stay in 1505. He came to share the Italian preoccupation with problems of perspective, ideal beauty, and harmony. In Dürer's view, Northern art had relied too heavily on instinct and lacked a firm grounding in theory and science. Toward the end of his life he summarized his philosophy of art by writing and illustrating two important works, *Treatise on Measurement* and *Four Books on Human Proportions*.

An artist who matured in the climate of thought that Dürer had created was the German painter Hans Holbein. Although not as intellectual as Dürer, Holbein recognized the need to grapple with the issues that Dürer had introduced. He mastered perspective and studied Italian paintings. Under





RELATED WORKS



4.46 Grien, *Groom*



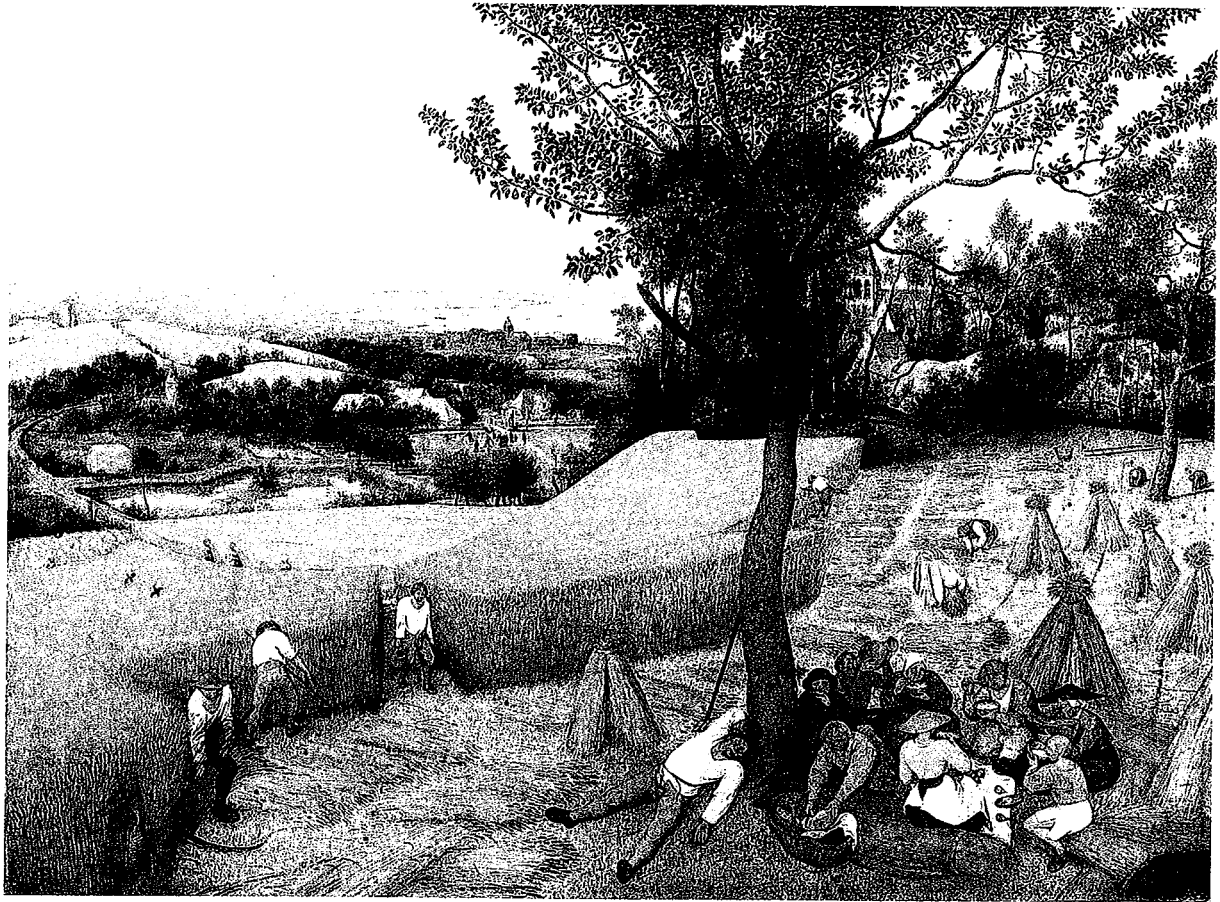
5.30 Grien, *The Three Ages of Woman, and Death*

their influence his modeling softened and his compositions grew more monumental. He did not lose the great Northern gift for detail, however, as his masterpiece known as *The Ambassadors* makes clear (16.20).

Holbein painted *The Ambassadors* in England, where his skills as a portraitist earned him the position of court painter to King Henry VIII. The painting was commissioned by the man on the left, Jean de Dinteville, the French ambassador to England. To the right is his friend Georges de Selve, a French bishop who also served as an ambassador. They look out at us from either side of a table richly laden with objects symbolizing the four humanist sciences—music, arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy. The imported Islamic rug speaks of contacts with the wider world, and the globe placed on the lower shelf reminds us that the Renaissance was also the age of European exploration and discovery. Close inspection reveals that the lute resting on the lower shelf has a broken string and that the book before it is open to a hymn by Martin Luther. The broken string symbolizes discord: Europe was no longer in harmony because of the difficult issues raised by Martin Luther's recent accusations against the Church in Rome. The movement Luther started, known as the Reformation, would very soon see Europe permanently divided into Protestant countries and Catholic countries. The religious unity that had characterized the Middle Ages would be gone forever.

The strangest element in the painting is the amorphous diagonal shape that seems to float in the foreground. Dinteville's personal motto was *memento mori*, Latin for "remember you must die." Holbein acknowledged this with a human skull, stretched as though made of rubber. The skull is painted to come into focus when the painting is viewed up close and at an angle. Death thus cuts across life and shows itself by surprise. Holbein's painting celebrates worldly splendor and human achievement even as it reminds us that death will eventually triumph. It stands as a portrait of two men, a portrait of a friendship, and a portrait of an era.

16.20 Hans Holbein the Younger. *The Ambassadors*. 1533. Oil on panel, 6'9½" × 6'10½". The National Gallery, London.



16.21 Pieter Bruegel the Elder.
The Harvesters. 1565. Oil on panel,
46½ × 63¼".
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Protestant reforms of the 16th century included an attitude toward religious images that ranged from wariness to outright hostility. Images of saints and other figures, reformers felt, had all too often been thought to possess sacred powers themselves. In their view, the Church in Rome had encouraged those beliefs, which amounted to idol worship. The walls of Protestant churches were bare: "The kingdom of God is a kingdom of hearing, not of seeing," said Martin Luther.⁷ One result was that Northern artists turned increasingly to the everyday world around them for subject matter, and one of the most fruitful subjects they began to explore was landscape.

We opened this brief survey of Northern Renaissance art with a manuscript page by the Limbourg brothers depicting a peasant household with a winter landscape in the background (see 16.16). *The Harvesters* (16.21), by the 16th-century Netherlandish painter Pieter Bruegel the Elder, advances the season to late summer and shows us how far painting has come in 150 years. Like the February page from the *Très Riches Heures*, *The Harvesters* formed part of a cycle depicting the months of the year. In the foreground, a group of peasants have paused for their midday meal in the shade of a slender tree. No doubt, they have been working in the fields since dawn. The little group sits, chatting and eating. One man has loosened his breeches and stretched out for a nap. In the middle ground, the still unmowed portion of the field stretches out like a golden carpet. Some people are still at work, the men mowing with their scythes, the women stooping to gather the wheat into sheaves. Beyond there opens a vast panorama, a peaceful, domesticated landscape stretching as far as the eye can see. Landscape, which served the Limbourg brothers as a backdrop, has here become the principal theme, a grand setting in which humans take their appointed place, the rhythm of their work and lives falling in with the rhythm of the seasons and of creation.

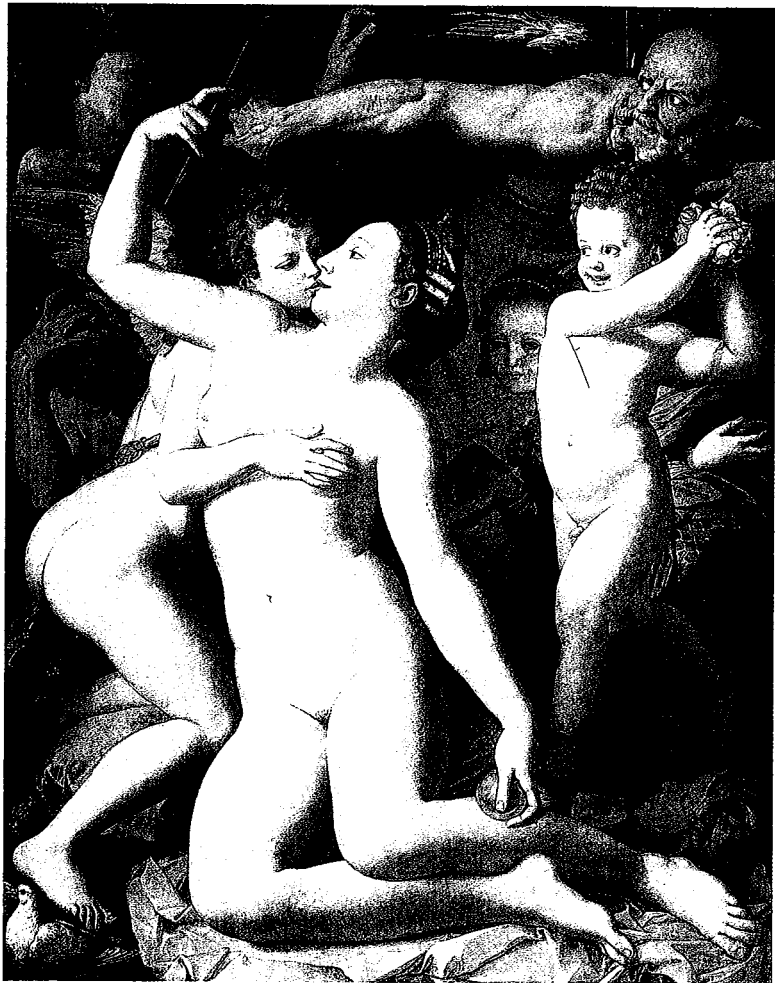
The Late Renaissance in Italy

Scholars generally date the end of the High Renaissance in Italy to the death of Raphael in 1520. The next generation of artists came of age in the shadow of this great period and with two of its most intimidating artists, Titian and Michelangelo, still going strong. Of the various artistic trends that emerged, the one that has interested art historians most is known as **Mannerism**.

The word Mannerism comes from the Italian *maniera*, meaning “style” or “stylishness,” and it was originally used to suggest that these painters practiced an art of grace and sophistication. Later critics characterized Mannerism as a decadent reaction against the order and balance of the High Renaissance. Today, however, most scholars agree that Mannerism actually grew out of possibilities suggested by the work of High Renaissance artists, especially Michelangelo, whose influence on the next generation was enormous.

Agnolo Bronzino’s bizarre *Allegory* (16.22) illustrates some of the fascinating and unsettling characteristics of Mannerism. In an allegory, all the figures and objects also stand for ideas or concepts, and we should be able to “decode” their interaction, perhaps to draw a moral lesson. But the allegory here is so obscure that scholars have yet to reconstruct it. This fondness for elaborate or obscure subject matter is typical of Mannerist artists and the highly cultivated audience they painted for. Also typical is the “forbidden” erotic undercurrent. We recognize Venus and Cupid in the foreground. They are mother and son, but their interaction hints at a different sort of relationship, and both are clearly arranged for our erotic appraisal as well. The elongated figures and twisting S-shaped poses are part of the Mannerist repertoire, as is the illogical picture space—a shallow, compressed zone filled with an impossible number of people.

16.22 Agnolo Bronzino. *Allegory* (“Venus, Cupid, Folly, and Time”). c. 1545. Oil on wood, 5'1" × 4'8¾". The National Gallery, London.



Bronzino's painting is an extreme example of the highly artificial and self-conscious aspects of Mannerist art. But Mannerist elements can also be seen in less exotic works, such as Sofonisba Anguissola's lovely *Portrait of Amilcare, Minerva, and Asdrubale Anguissola* (16.23). The first woman artist known to have achieved celebrity among her contemporaries, Anguissola was born about 1535 in Cremona, the eldest of six sisters and one brother. She was well educated and was trained in painting; by about age twenty-two, she had attracted the admiring attention of Michelangelo.

The *Portrait of Amilcare, Minerva, and Asdrubale Anguissola*—the artist's father, sister, and brother—dates from around 1557. Sofonisba Anguissola here brought something new to the art of Renaissance portraiture, a feeling for family interaction, tenderness, and affection. Fate did not allow her to develop that gift, however. Her career took her to the court of Spain, where she had obtained a position as portrait painter and drawing instructor. Her departure, in fact, may have been what caused her to abandon work on this portrait, which remains unfinished. The Spanish court favored a far more stiff and formal style, and Anguissola, like all Renaissance artists, needed to please her patrons.

The Protestant Reformation in northern Europe drew large numbers of people away from the Roman Catholic Church. Deeply wounded, the Church of Rome regrouped itself and struck back. The Catholic Counter-Reformation, begun in the second half of the 16th century and continuing into the 17th, aimed at preserving what strength the Church still had in the southern countries and perhaps recovering some lost ground in the North. The concerns of the reformers extended to art, which they recognized as one of their strongest weapons. They insisted that all representations of sacred subjects conform strictly to the teachings of the Church and that artists arrange their compositions to make those teachings evident. They also understood and encouraged art's ability to appeal to the emotions, to engage the hearts of the faithful as well as their intellects.

16.23 Sofonisba Anguissola. *Portrait of Amilcare, Minerva, and Asdrubale Anguissola*. c. 1558. Oil on canvas, 61¾ × 48".
Nivaagaards Malerisamling, Niva.





The Last Supper (16.24) by the Venetian painter Tintoretto is an excellent example of the art encouraged by the Counter-Reformation. The greatest painter of the generation after Titian, Tintoretto developed his style from the virtuosic brushwork and dramatic lighting effects of Titian's late works (see 16.15). Tintoretto has chosen to portray the central theological moment of the Last Supper, when Christ breaks bread and gives it to his disciples to eat—the basis for the Christian sacrament of communion. The dramatic diagonal of the table sweeps our eyes into the picture and toward the figure of Christ, who stands near the very center of the canvas. His potentially obscure position in the distance is compensated for by the light that radiates from his head. Lesser glows of saintliness shine from the heads of his apostles, who sense the importance of the moment. Only Judas, who will soon betray Christ, does not emit the light of understanding. He is seated close to Jesus, but alone on the opposite side of the table, a symbolic placement that is both obvious and effective. Witnesses from heaven crowd into the scene from above, swirling in excitement. Though unseen by the servants, who go about their business, they are visible to us, who are left in no doubt that a miracle is taking place.

Comparing Tintoretto's version of *The Last Supper* with Leonardo's High Renaissance fresco (see 4.45), we can see that what was internalized, subtle, and intellectual has here become externalized, exaggerated, and emotional. Tintoretto's work prepares us well for the next era in art, for key elements of his *Last Supper*—the dramatic use of light, the theatricality, the heightened emotionalism, and even the diagonal composition—will play prominent roles in a style soon to be taken up across all of Europe during the Baroque.

16.24 Tintoretto. *The Last Supper*. 1592–94. Oil on canvas, 12' × 18'8". San Giorgio Maggiore, Venice.