Renaissance Art and Architecture

The word “renaissance” means “rebirth,” and as Europe moved out of the Middle Ages, many people felt as if the world was indeed being born again. The period witnessed a rethinking and remaking of society’s institutions. It was also a time when leading thinkers revisited the “great ideas” of ancient Greece and Rome and found new ways in which to apply these ideas.
From roughly 1050 to 1300, Europe experienced population growth, economic development, and a rise in the political power of some independent city-states. These changes set the stage for a remarkable period of creativity that lasted from the late 1200s to about the late 1500s. During this time, Europe witnessed an incredible explosion of artistic achievement that began in Italy and eventually spread throughout the continent.
At the core of the Italian Renaissance lay an intellectual movement known as “humanism.” It was based on the study of classical culture—Greece and Rome—and focused on secular or worldly subjects rather than religious ones. Humanists stressed education as a stimulant to creativity and believed that the subjects taught in ancient Greek and Roman schools—grammar, poetry, and history—should be revived. Many of the important figures of the Italian Renaissance considered themselves the direct inheritors of the classical tradition.

Recognition of the importance of the individual—something which happened rarely, if at all, in the medieval era—was a critical aspect of the Renaissance. Much of Renaissance artwork reveals a glorification of humanity and a celebration of the beauty of the human body.

The Renaissance focused less on religion and the afterlife and more on enjoying the pleasures of life in the here and now. Humanists wanted to expand the focus of Christianity beyond sin and redemption to include the full range of human experience—a desire which often led to conflict with the Catholic Church.
The Renaissance started in Italy and, over the next 200 years or so, spread north into other parts of Europe. At the beginning of the 1400s, Italy was not a unified nation but consisted instead of a series of relatively independent city-states. Each city-state had its own ruler: for example, the Pope in Rome presided over the Papal States, the Medici family dominated the Republic of Florence, the Doge ruled the Republic of Venice, the Sforza family was preeminent in the Duchy of Milan, and the Este family governed Ferrara. Relations between the city-states were characterized by an intense rivalry that most often took the form of economic and artistic competition but sometimes erupted into open warfare.
Florence

Probably the most important of the Italian city-states during the Renaissance was Florence, a center of commerce, trade, banking, and textiles. Many Florentine businessmen and political leaders financed the artists of the Renaissance. Merchant guilds and religious orders looking to increase their power or prestige would also commission artists to create works. The picture on the right of this slide shows the emblem of the city of Florence as rendered by Donatello, one of the most important artists of the Renaissance.
The painting in this slide, by Renaissance artist Domenico Ghirlandaio, illustrates several key techniques and themes of Renaissance art. Medieval art had focused almost exclusively on religious subjects; this painting, which shows wealthy Florentine merchants, offers an example of how Renaissance artists began to branch out and center their works around secular subjects. Note in the painting how the faces are distinct from one another and portray realistic emotions. In addition, the use of light and shadow—as evidenced by the folds in the robes and the contrast of the darker figures against the lighter background—gives the image depth. Next, take a look at how the various positions of the merchants' bodies create a sense of movement and activity. Finally, note the symmetry of the painting, with the central figure (in brown) flanked on either side by two other figures.
Comparing Medieval Art and Renaissance Art

Medieval art often appeared flat and lifeless. Faces tended to look alike, and the paintings were two-dimensional, lacking in proportion and perspective. The picture on the left of this slide was painted in 1020. Note that all of the people in this painting are the same size regardless of their distance from the front.

In addition, most art of the Middle Ages centered on religious themes. Renaissance artists began to move away from this religious emphasis, focusing instead on the humanist themes of glorification of humanity and respect for the individual.

Compare the painting on the right (also by Ghirlandaio) to the painting on the left. Note how the Renaissance work has depth and movement. The figures have distinct facial features and realistic-looking expressions; they also appear to be having a conversation. Through its representations of movement, implied conversation, and natural human emotions and responses, this and other art of the Renaissance looks much more alive and active than medieval art.
The so-called Florentine school of painting began in the Middle Ages and reached its height during the Renaissance. Giotto de Bondone (1266–1337) was one of the great early innovators of the Florentine school. He pioneered the technique of fresco painting (i.e., painting directly onto wet plaster), which was used often for Renaissance murals. He was also one of the first to try for a more realistic look to the figures in his paintings, giving them a feel of three-dimensionality and authenticity that made them appear much more human and lifelike than figures in medieval paintings. In *The Mourning of Christ*, Giotto makes each figure a distinct individual whose face displays a different expression of grief. Though the painting does not show the mathematical three-dimensional perspective later Renaissance art would, it does seem much less flat than the medieval painting we viewed in the previous slide.
Masaccio (1401–1428) was the first artist of the Florentine school to really develop the technique of perspective, which is the use of lines, light and shadow, and relative sizing to bring depth and realism to a picture. His work influenced a generation of painters to come. The image in this slide shows a scene from a fresco series that Masaccio painted for the Brancacci Chapel in Florence.
Note how Masaccio creates the illusion of depth in the picture. The parts of the building that appear farther away from the viewer look so because they have been drawn smaller. The angle at which the building lies seems to create an imaginary line leading to a point in the distance at the center of the picture, which lines up with the central character in blue. All of this gives the picture a sense of depth and realism.
This image also displays symmetry and organization. Note how the heads of the people form a line which cuts the picture in half horizontally. The lines of the building, meanwhile, serve to divide the picture in two vertically, isolating the action on the right from the scene on the left.
Sandro Botticelli (1445–1510) created works renowned for their line and symmetry; the figures in his paintings also tend to have realistic expressions and display a real sense of activity. Note how in the painting shown in this slide, the reality and movement of the figures, the bright sensuous colors, and the emotion of the image make it seem alive and real, and less of a spiritual concept.
Note how the lines of the figures in the painting all serve to lead the viewer’s eye to places that give the impression of activity. For example, the lines of the raised arms of the angels on either side of the painting lead the viewer to focus on the crown being placed atop the Madonna’s head. Next, the gentle curve of the Madonna’s left arm leads viewers’ attention to the infant Christ seated in her lap. Finally, the arms of both mother and child lead to the book (the Magnificat) in which she is writing.
Raffaello Sanzio (1483–1520), better known as Raphael, was known for his use of depth and perspective. Though he only spent a few years in Florence, he built such a great reputation there that Pope Julius II called him to Rome and commissioned him to create paintings for several walls of the Vatican. After completing his work at the Vatican, Raphael continued to paint for the Church, including this famous 1518 portrait of Julius’s successor, Pope Leo X.
Note in the painting how the arm of the cardinal on the left forms a curve which leads your eye to the curving fold in the Pope’s robe, which leads your eye to the hand of the figure on the right and upward to the right edge of the picture. Note also how the white line in the Pope’s robe leads your eye upward to the central image of the picture—the well-lit face of the Pope. Note also how the line of the table aligns with the arms of the Pope and the cardinal on the right.
Raphael, *The School of Athens*

*The School of Athens*, one of the paintings Raphael created for the walls of the Stanza della Segnatura in the Vatican, displays several key themes and techniques of Renaissance art.
This piece contains many famous philosophers from ancient Greece. In the center of the picture, Raphael shows Plato (in the red toga with one finger pointing upward) speaking with Aristotle (in the blue toga standing next to Plato, with one finger pointing downward). Raphael has made Plato look like Leonardo da Vinci: at several other points in this painting, Raphael uses this device of making certain ancient philosophers look like key Renaissance figures. For example, the rather depressed-looking figure leaning on the block in the front represents Heraclitus but looks like Michelangelo; the figure leaning over at the bottom right represents Euclid but looks like architect Donato Bramante, who worked on the Vatican redesign at the same time as Raphael. Finally, Raphael also put himself in the painting, though he is nearly hidden off to the right. By placing contemporary figures in ancient Athens, Raphael was both making a statement of respect for the Greeks and implying that his contemporaries were their inheritors and equals.
The picture also makes effective use of symmetry. Note how the central arch is bisected by the line implied by the tops of the people’s heads. This line also parallels the line of the stairs. Lines also bisect the picture vertically. The small central circle at the very top of the largest arch in the painting implies a line that cuts all of the arches in half, goes between Plato and Aristotle at the center of the painting, and lines up with the object against which Heraclitus leans. Finally, the statues at the right and the left add to the overall sense of symmetry.

Raphael also used certain effects to create a sense of perspective. The decreasing size of the arches gives a feeling of distance and depth; note also how the light from the doorway arch in the background contrasts with the darker colors of Plato and Aristotle, drawing the viewer’s eye to these two central figures.
Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519) is considered by many to be the greatest overall genius of the Renaissance. Both an accomplished scientist and artist, he was the epitome of the “Renaissance Man”—a master not of one thing but of many things. His notebooks contain speculations on many subjects, including weapon design, human anatomy, flying machines, birds, astronomy, and a multitude of other topics. As an artist, he created both sculptures and paintings.
The Last Supper, a fresco, is one of Leonardo’s greatest works. While this biblical scene had been painted many times before, it had never been composed in the way that Leonardo chose to, nor had the figures been portrayed in such a lively and emotional fashion.
The use of lines and perspective is obvious. The horizontal lines of the table, and of the doorway and windows frame the action in the painting and draw the viewer’s eye toward the main viewing area. The lines created by the series of tapestries hung on the walls not only provide the illusion of depth but also draw the viewer’s eye to the center of the painting where Jesus stands out in contrast to the bright sunny day as seen through the doorway behind him.
The work also reveals a careful symmetry. Jesus sits at the exact center of the painting, with six disciples on either side of him. Furthermore, the disciples are grouped into sets of three, and each group appears to be reacting differently to Jesus's announcement that one among them will betray him.
Leonardo, *Mona Lisa*

The painting *Mona Lisa* is perhaps Leonardo’s best known piece, and many consider it to be the single greatest piece of Renaissance artwork. It contains many of the hallmarks of Renaissance art. The Mona Lisa is a recognizable, real-looking individual, although who she actually was has been the source of much controversy. Most evidence seems to indicate that Francesco di Bartolommeo di Zanobi del Giocondo, a Florentine noble, commissioned Leonardo to paint a portrait of his wife, Lisa di Antonio Maria di Noldo Gherardini. Some people, however, claim that the Mona Lisa was someone else; a few have even theorized that she is based on Leonardo himself because comparisons of her facial structure and that of Leonardo in self-portraits reveal certain similarities.
The picture makes extensive use of perspective. Notice how the line of the balcony divides the picture in two and forms the bottom of a triangle that is completed by the slope of her shoulders and draws the viewer’s eye to the center of her head. Leonardo manages to highlight and emphasize her face by surrounding it with dark hair and dark clothing.

Leonardo pioneered a painting technique known as sfumato, which he uses to great effect in the Mona Lisa. The technique involves slight blurring and/or blending in order to create a sense of mystery and allow viewers to use their imaginations to fill in the details. Leonardo employed sfumato in the areas around the Mona Lisa’s mouth and eyes, giving her overall expression an enigmatic quality and a soft focus.
Leonardo’s notebooks are filled with a variety of scientific observations and sketches. The image in this slide shows a drawing he made that displays the proportions of the human body. Like many other Renaissance artists, Leonardo used studies of human anatomy to bring more realism and accuracy to his paintings and sculptures.
Michelangelo and the Sistine Chapel

Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475–1564) was one of the greatest artistic geniuses of the Renaissance, producing stunning achievements in sculpture, painting, and architecture. In 1508, Pope Julius II commissioned Michelangelo to paint the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Michelangelo worked on his back, about 65 feet up in the air. The work was sweaty, dirty, and tiring; it took over four years to complete. The process for creating the ceiling of the chapel was intensive. Michelangelo made over 200 preliminary drawings, which were then made into cartoons and put on top of the wet plaster of the ceiling. He then traced outlines into the plaster. Michelangelo did most of the work himself, dismissing his assistants early on in the project because he felt their work was inferior.
The panels on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel depict scenes from the Old Testament. The picture in this slide presents a close-up of the most famous of those scenes, *Creation of Adam*, which shows God giving the “spark of life” to Adam. Note how both God and Adam are realistic-looking and well-proportioned. In addition, the way that Michelangelo has rendered them implies movement and emotion: for example, note the windblown appearance of God’s beard. In this scene, God projects a sense of power, not just through his muscular body but through his intense gaze as well.
Renaissance Sculpture

- Classical influences
- Realistic-looking faces
- Symmetry/proportionality
- Sense of movement/activity

Renaissance sculpture incorporated many classical influences while also displaying some of the same elements used in Renaissance painting, such as realistic-looking faces, a concern for symmetry and proportionality, and a sense of movement or activity. In addition, much of Renaissance sculpture was free-standing—a type of sculpture not seen in Europe since the days of the Greeks and Romans.
Humanism and Individuality

Realistic-looking depictions of people in Renaissance art imply a respect for individuality—a hallmark of humanism. The busts shown in this slide illustrate the dignity and power of the individuals they represent. The face on the left exhibits strength, dignity, and pride. The rippling of the clothing gives the bust depth and realism. The one on the right also projects power, seriousness, and dignity. The beard looks thick, full, and rich. The clothing hangs naturally and implies a strong body underneath.
In 1401, at the age of 23, Florentine sculptor Lorenzo Ghiberti (1381–1455) won the honor of creating new doors for the baptistery of a local cathedral. He spent more than 20 years on the North Doors of the cathedral, then worked for more than 25 years creating the East Doors. The doors are divided into panels, each showing scenes from the Bible. The picture in this slide shows six panels of the East Doors. The detail, liveliness, and use of perspective in the doors astounded Ghiberti’s contemporaries.
Ghiberti’s Doors

The picture on this slide, a close-up of one of the scenes, shows the biblical story of Creation. Ghiberti was one of the first Renaissance sculptors to try and achieve depth and perspective using techniques similar to those of Renaissance painters. Note how the figures meant to appear closer to the viewer are larger and sculpted in greater relief, so that they physically project more from the panel than the more “distant” figures do. Ghiberti also used landscapes and architecture to give the illusion of depth: note the distant woodlands on the left and the arch through which one of the angels is flying on the right.
Donatello’s *David*

Donatello (1386–1466) had worked as an assistant to Ghiberti in creating the baptistery doors; he later became an important sculptor in his own right. His bronze statue of the biblical David (a close-up shown in the picture in this slide) was the first free-standing nude statue created during the Renaissance. Donatello depicts David after his battle with Goliath. David has on a hat and boots and holds in his hand Goliath’s sword; Goliath’s severed head lies under his foot. The statue’s real emphasis, however, is not on the victory over the Philistine giant, but on the beauty, grace, and power of David’s body. With *David*, Donatello finely and accurately detailed the proportions of the human form, creating an ideal of physical beauty.
Michelangelo’s sculpture of David, though similar in some ways to Donatello’s, differs in several key aspects. First, it’s much larger—16 feet tall as opposed to Donatello’s 5-foot statue. Second, whereas Donatello showed David after his fight with Goliath, Michelangelo depicts David at the very moment he decided to take on Goliath in battle.
The image on the left in this slide shows a close-up of one of the hands of Michelangelo’s statue of David. Note the detailed skeletal structure and musculature. The statue also demonstrates the Renaissance ideal of respect for the classical past because the ancient Greeks often created sculptures that were free-standing and had realistic details such as the musculature.

The image on the right in this slide shows a close-up of David’s face, perhaps the most striking aspect of the statue. It shows tension, intensity, a sense of cleverness, power, and confidence as he makes his decision to engage Goliath. Most importantly, the face looks realistic, not idealized. Note also in this picture how David’s hand holds the sling he will use to kill Goliath. The sling is barely noticeable when looking at the statue as a whole—something Michelangelo deliberately did in order to emphasize that David achieved his victory through courage, not superior weaponry.
Renaissance Architecture

- Classical influences
- Mathematical harmony
- The circle

Like Renaissance painting and sculpture, Renaissance architecture also was influenced by classical forms and ideas from ancient Greece and Rome. Many Renaissance architects revived the use of classical architectural features such as columns, arches, and domes. Architects also drew particular inspiration from the Greek mathematician Pythagoras, who had theorized that many of the mysteries of the universe could be explained through mathematical ratios that revealed a harmony of proportion and divinely created order. Many architects came to believe the circle represented the ideal shape for building because classical mathematicians had seen it as the epitome of geometric perfection.
During the Renaissance, the Catholic Church began to invest in the construction of new religious structures and in the beautification of existing ones in Rome and other Italian city-states. The photo in this slide shows the interior of the Church of Santa Croce in Florence, which was built as part of this wave of Renaissance construction.
In 1294, noted sculptor and architect Arnolfo di Cambio was given the task of designing and building the Santa Maria del Fiore—the Cathedral of Florence. He laid out and began working on a huge new building that would be topped with a low cupola (a cup-shaped dome that functions as a roof). Arnolfo died, however, in 1302, and though work on other parts of the cathedral continued through the 1300s, no roof was ever added to the building, primarily because it was so big that existing methods of scaffolding (temporary architectural supports used to reinforce a building’s roof) wouldn’t hold up. Finally, in 1418 the famous architect Filippo Brunelleschi (1377–1446) won a competition to design and build a cupola for the cathedral. His solution incorporated a blend of old and new: he drew inspiration from the Pantheon in Rome (which he studied in person) and he also used mathematics to invent a new method of construction. Though not fully completed until 1474 (long after Brunelleschi’s death), the dome of the Cathedral of Florence turned out to be one of the greatest architectural creations of the Renaissance.
Brunelleschi’s Dome

At its highest point, the dome rises 370 feet above street level. Brunelleschi used complex geometry to create a “herring-bone” technique in which the dome was built up as a series of rings that became gradually smaller until the cupola was complete.
Michelangelo was a highly regarded architect, and one of last projects on which he worked was the construction of St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome—particularly on the building’s dome. He was made chief architect by Pope Paul III in 1546 and worked on this church until his death in 1564.
Inside St. Peter’s

The high altar of St. Peter’s Basilica, designed by Michelangelo.
Inside St. Peter’s

The ceiling of the nave of St. Peter’s. Note the use of Roman-style arches.
Inside St. Peter’s

The interior of Michelangelo’s dome of St. Peter’s. The dome stands 452 feet high.

With the Florence Cathedral, Brunelleschi had designed the cupola as a dome within a dome, separated by an octagonal drum which helped to provide support. With St. Peter’s, Michelangelo chose to create a single dome supported by a colonnaded drum.
Originally a painter, Donato Bramante (1444–1514) came to be considered by many during the Renaissance as the greatest architect of his time. His style was heavily influenced by classical Roman architecture, as one can see when viewing his Tempietto. Commissioned by Spanish monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella, this relatively tiny structure (only 15 feet in diameter) was constructed in Rome on the spot where St. Peter was supposedly killed. With its Doric columns, precise mathematical proportions, and circular shape, the Tempietto is reminiscent of ancient Roman temples such as the Pantheon.
The Renaissance was also a time of great creativity for writers, who commented on events of their era, helped shape culture and society, and gave voice to the ideals of humanism.
Dante Alighieri

- 1265–1321
- *The Divine Comedy*

Dante wrote *The Divine Comedy*, an allegorical poem in which he travels through Hell and Purgatory with a glimpse of Heaven at the end. In the poem, the Roman poet Virgil, symbolizing reason, leads Dante on his journey. While describing the torments of the damned and the purification of souls, the poem contains many references to Dante’s contemporaries and comments on political issues of the day. It is considered to be a poetic masterpiece. It was written in the **vernacular**, or the daily language that was in everyday use by common people in Italy at the time.
Francesco Petrarch was one of the leading humanist writers and wrote frequently of classical figures in Greek and Roman history, literature, and philosophy. Many regarded him as the greatest scholar of his age, and he clearly influenced other writers throughout Europe. He wrote the majority of his works in Latin, although he composed his sonnets in Italian. He is best known for a series of poems addressed to “Laura” as well as many letters, including an autobiography titled *To Posterity*. Also among his works was a collection of 366 poems called the *Canzoniere* or “Love Songs.”
Giovanni Boccaccio

- 1313–1375
- Poet, humanist

Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–1375), a friend of Petrarch, a humanist, and a poet, is best known for his piece *Decameron*. It is a collection of witty stories told by a group of friends fleeing Florence to escape the plague. It contains graphic descriptions of the course of the disease, but through the tales told by the group of ten many of the author’s thoughts on issues such as good luck vs. bad luck, deception, and virtues in general are revealed.
Castiglione’s *Libro del Cortegiano* (*The Courtier*) had a great impact on social mores and the behavior of the European elite for years after it was written. The book described the ideal of what a “courtly” young man should be: trained in academic, spiritual, and physical matters; well-versed in dance, music, and art; and generally knowledgeable on a range of subjects.
The Northern Renaissance

The influence of the Italian Renaissance eventually spread into northern Europe. As it did so, the movement changed. The Northern Renaissance developed with a more Christian character than the Italian Renaissance; it was also characterized by a greater attempt to reconcile the new secularism with traditional Christianity.
Albrecht Dürer, a German master, introduced the techniques and themes of Italian Renaissance art to Germany. He had visited Italy (Venice in particular) in the 1490s and was influenced by the work of artists he had seen there—especially da Vinci. Although it is not in color, the woodcut shown in this slide has many Renaissance characteristics, such as natural and realistic-looking figures, and the use of light and shadow to imply depth and perspective. Like many works of the Northern Renaissance, the theme of this piece is religious—Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.
Hans Holbein the Younger was a Renaissance artist from Germany who also spent much time in England, serving at one point as court painter to King Henry VIII. Holbein’s father, Hans Holbein the Elder, had been a Gothic painter of some note, known mainly for works he created (especially several altarpieces) for churches. Holbein the Younger is generally considered to have surpassed his father in terms of talent and achievement.

Holbein gained fame as a portraitist, and his works include some of the most famous portraits ever painted. Like Italian Renaissance painters, his portrait subjects display an intense expressiveness. He also provided illustrations for some famous books of the era (including Martin Luther’s German-language version of the Bible) and created a series of 41 woodcuts called *The Dance of Death.*
Flemish artist Jan van Eyck is generally credited with perfecting the new technique of painting in oils. The pieces he created are highly detailed and the figures in them display a remarkable degree of realism, especially in their facial expressions. They lack the mathematical perspective and appearance of depth that Italian Renaissance paintings show, however, because van Eyck was not familiar with the techniques used to create perspective. The picture in this slide shows the altarpiece van Eyck created for the Cathedral of St. Bavo in Ghent. The upper central part of the piece shows John the Baptist flanked by the Virgin Mary on the left and Jesus on the right.
Evidence of the influence of Renaissance thought appeared in England in the late 14th and early 15th centuries. The poet Geoffrey Chaucer (1340–1400) produced the *Canterbury Tales*, a collection of stories written in the vernacular. He is believed to have been influenced by Boccaccio, author of the *Decameron*.

Thomas More (1478–1535) became England’s greatest humanist. His book *Utopia* described an ideal society based on reason and tolerance, with no private property and no war but within a Christian framework.

The Renaissance reached its full maturity in Elizabethan England with the development of some of the world’s greatest literature. The poetry of Edmund Spenser (*The Faerie Queen*, in particular) was based on an Italian model. Playwrights Ben Jonson and Christopher Marlowe also produced plays still studied today.

Perhaps the most significant—and certainly the most famous—English Renaissance writer was William Shakespeare (1564–1616). A prolific playwright and poet, he produced comedies, tragedies, and histories which reflected (among other things) an appreciation for classical culture, humanist ideas, and the importance of the individual. His plays are still central to the study of literature.
The impact of the Renaissance cannot be overstated. It produced some of the greatest geniuses in human history. It changed art forever: many of the techniques developed then are still used today. Furthermore, the Renaissance’s emphasis on the importance of the individual would later become part of the foundation that would drive the development of democratic governments and capitalist economic systems in Europe and North America.