

The Fifteenth Century

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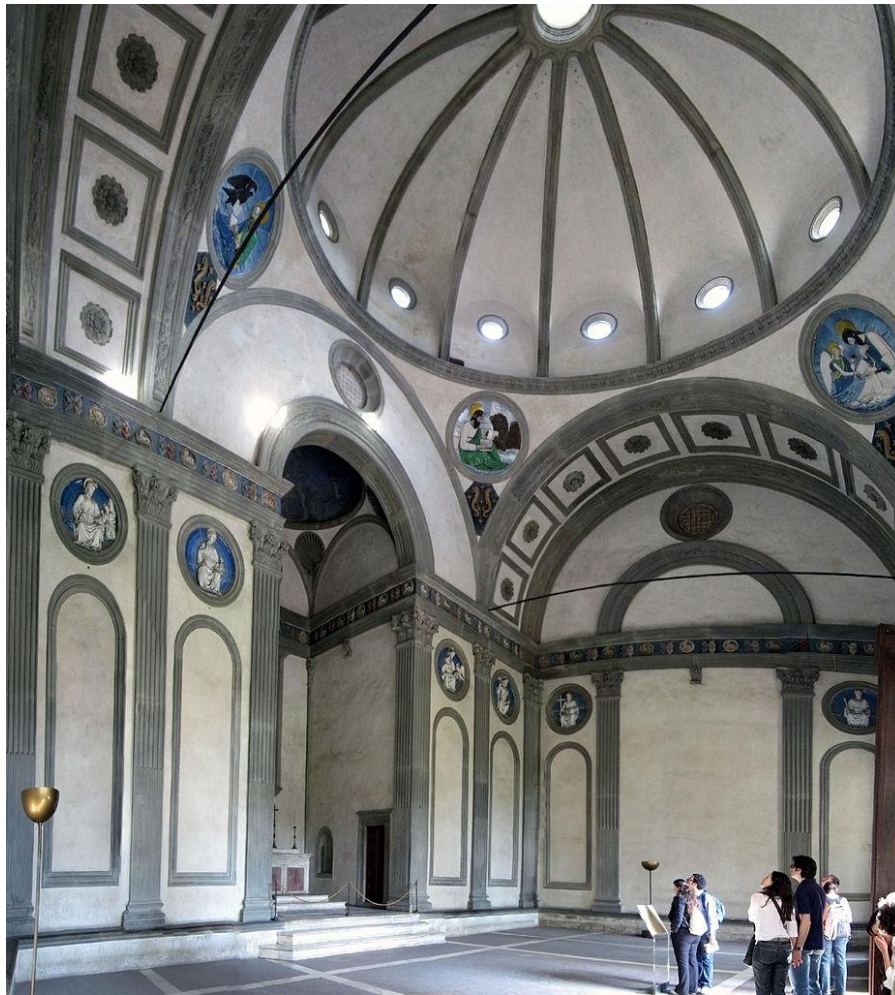
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Renaissance artists knew they were recovering the arts after the Dark Ages, and looked back to Classical Greek and Rome. Art in Italy and northern Europe remained largely religious. The 15th century was the golden age of Flemish and Florentine painting.

Beginnings of the Italian Renaissance

The first Renaissance building was the Pazzi Chapel in Florence, designed by Filippo Brunelleschi, and was very different to the Gothic style, which was associated with northern Europe. Florence had been threatened by attack from the north, but after the death in 1402 of an important enemy, the city prospered and expanded. Florentines revelled in their fortune and took pride in their origin as a Roman colony. The Gothic style was abandoned. Just as in ancient Rome, particularly in the design of Pantheon and other temples, new buildings were defined by cubes and spheres, and proportional relationships.

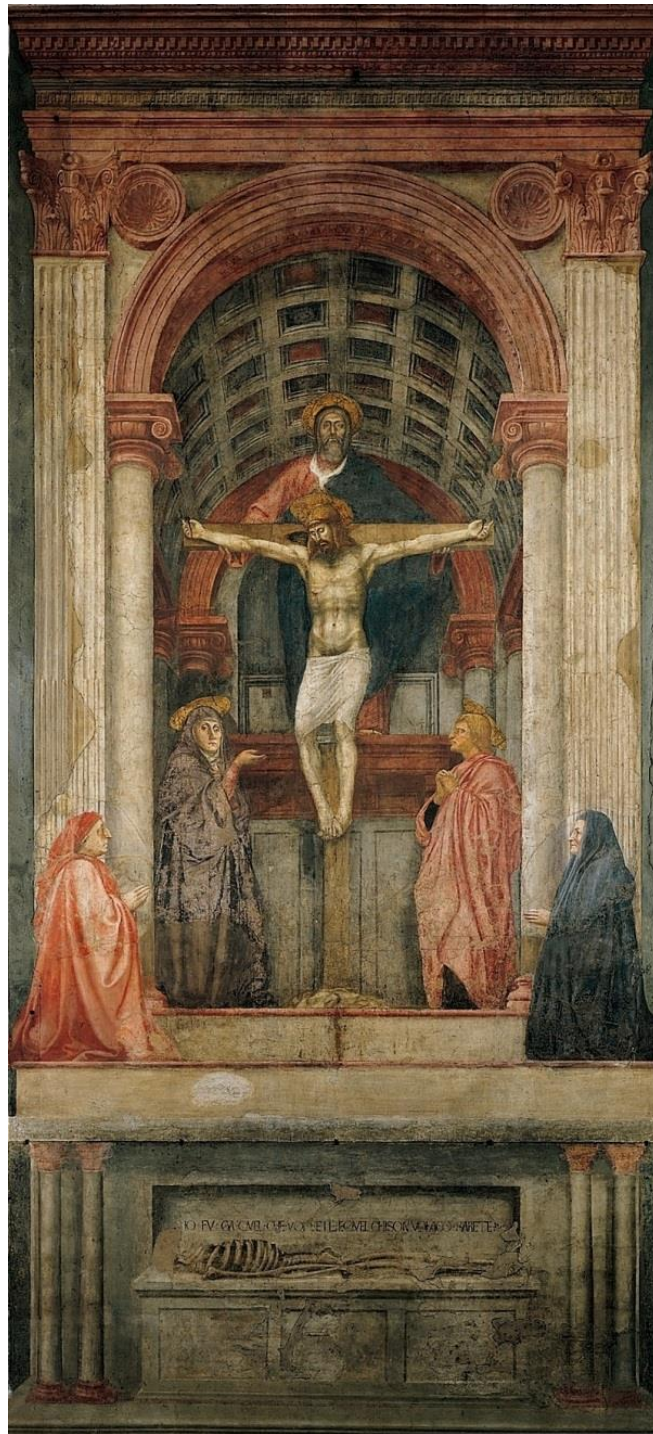


Pazzi Chapel, Florence, 1441-1460s

Masaccio (1401-1428)

Brunelleschi is credited also with the innovation of linear perspective and the enthusiasm with which it was received cannot be over-estimated. It imposed order on scenes which painters sought to portray, and artists were quick to take it up, Masaccio being one of the first. Masaccio was goodness itself, but absent-minded, devoting all his time to art and none to himself, the way he dressed or the things owed to him. Consequently, instead of being called by his given name Tommaso (Tommaso de Giovanni di Simone Guidi) he was addressed as Masaccio; “*sloppy Tom*”.

The effect of linear perspective can be seen in Masaccio’s *Holy Trinity*. All the figures are to scale and set in a unified and convincingly receding space. The tomb is painted to give the impression that it juts into the viewer’s space, and bears a warning: “*As you are now, so once was I; as I am now, so too will you be.*”

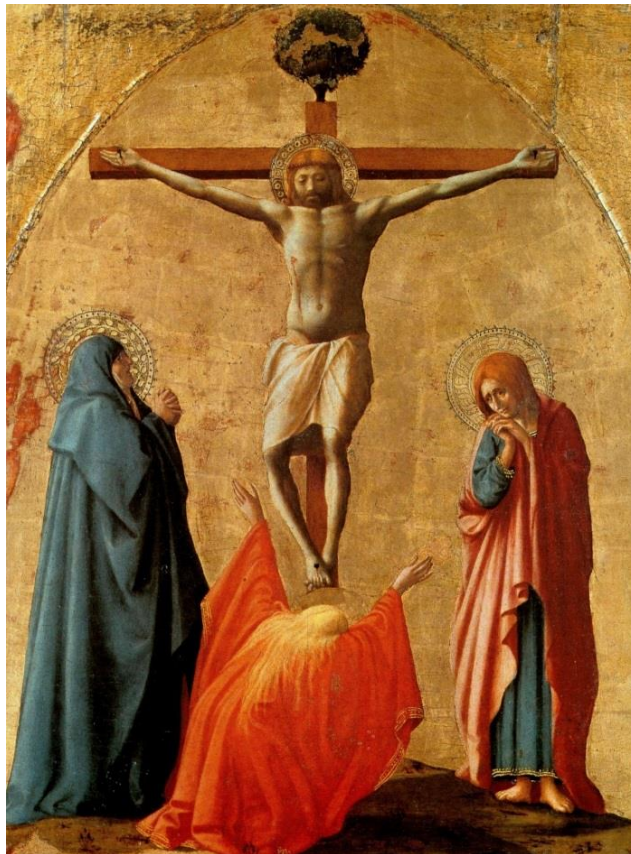


Masaccio, *Holy Trinity*, 1425, fresco, S Maria Novella, Florence

Masaccio revitalised the human figure with the robustness it had had with Giotto, and used *chiaroscuro* (the manipulation of light and shade) to model them. For this he studied sculptures to give his figures solidity and to understand how light fell on them. Sculpture is vital to Renaissance painting. Vasari credits Masaccio with bringing into existence the modern style.

"He gave a beginning to beautiful attitudes, movements, liveliness and vivacity, rendering relief in a way that was characteristic and natural ... his technique of foreshortening figures from below was truly marvellous."

Figural solidity, intensity of expression and the natural fall of draperies shown accurately in light and shadow can all be seen in *Crucifixion*.



Masaccio, *Crucifixion* from the *Pisa Altarpiece*, c 1426 (tempera on gold ground)

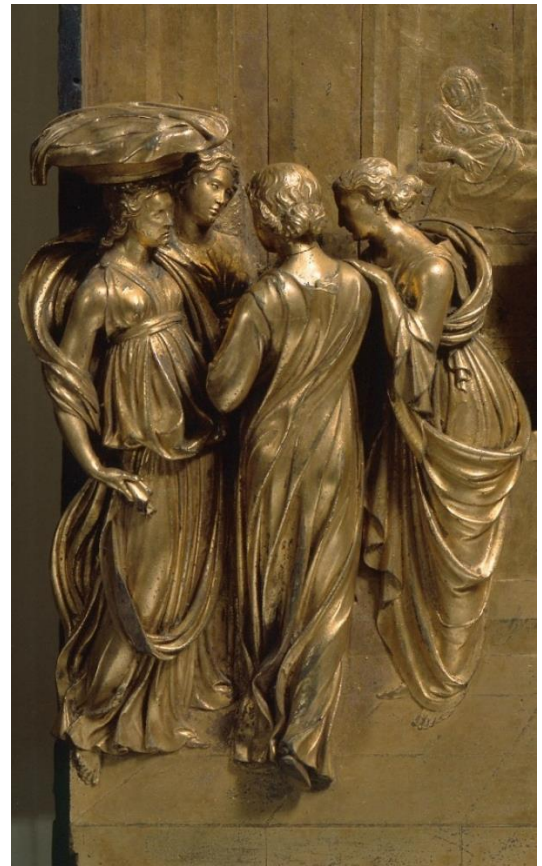
For large religious scenes Masaccio used a spacious landscape instead of Giotto's shallow stage. Giotto's figures appear in a flat light. Masaccio uses a source of light (here from the chapel window) which casts shadows and reveals some figures sharply, notably Christ in the centre, again pointed out by trees.



Masaccio, *Tribute Money*, c 1427, fresco (renovated 1989), Brancacci Chapel, Florence

Three episodes are depicted: Christ telling Peter that he would find a coin in the fish, the discovery of it (to the left) and the use of it to pay the tax collector (on the right). Masaccio died prematurely at 26 – so suddenly Vasari considered suspected poisoning. Brunelleschi was plunged into grief at the “terrible loss”.

Mastery of perspective influenced sculptors as well as painters. Lorenzo Ghiberti won a public competition to decorate a second set of doors for the Florence Baptistry. He rejected the Gothic style used in the first set. Instead Lorenzo favoured naturalism with wonderful line and perspective. His rectangular and circular buildings could have been from ancient Rome.



Ghiberti's modelling and finishing of human figures was exquisite. For example, the middle scene of the left door shows the story of Jacob and Esau. In the group of women on the left, Rebecca is turned away from us. The lines of cloth along her body are beautiful; gentle movement is evident in raised foot and left arm; the touch of her friend's hand on her shoulder feels soft and graceful.

Lorenzo Ghiberti, *Porta del Paradiso*, 1424-52, Baptistry, Florence

Giorgio Vasari remembered many verses singing the praises of Ghiberti, but cited one which recorded Michelangelo's reaction when seeing the doors:

*When Michelangelo the panels saw
Gleaming upon the church in gilded bronze
Amaz'd he stood; after long wonder thus
The solemn silence broke: "O work divine!
O door worthy of heaven."*

Vasari wrote *The Lives of Artists* in 1568 which looked back on the Renaissance. Vasari (who loved Florence) maintained the new movements in art originated in the city and spread from there. This is misleading. By the mid-15th century, Italy and Flanders were the two most densely urbanised areas in Europe. Vasari neglects Flemish art; a grave disservice.

New Styles in Flanders

Flemish artists developed linear perspective by trial and error, and also experimented with aerial perspective to suggest distance. Previously there had been very little large-scale painting in Flanders. The Limbourg's manuscript illuminations had been the region's great contribution to art. To produce the same bright and lustrous effects in larger works, oil painting was developed. Oil had been used from the 10th century to bind powdered pigments, but not until the 15th century in Flanders did artists experiment with applying translucent films of paint over opaque colours to give an appearance of depth. Oil dries slowly and layers could be built up. This allowed the great precision of detail - the most immediate feature of 15th century Flemish painting.



Robert Campin, *The Merode Triptych*, c 1422/1430

The other features are a greater pictorial depth, with scenes of towns in the background, and the depiction of divine events in domestic interiors. St Francis of Assisi and his mendicant friars interpreted the Bible in terms of the reality of the folk they preached to. This emphasis continued and in the 14th century a Dutch preacher Geert Groote suggested: “*Let us imagine ourselves living in the same house as Christ and Mary.*” **Robert Campin also known as “The Master of Flemalle” (c 1375 – 1444)** follows Groote’s idea in *The Merode Triptych*. Mary is happily reading in her sitting-room while Joseph is busy with carpentry, when an angel visits with the message of the annunciation. The scenes are set in contemporary times; another novel aspect of Flemish art. The pair on the left panel are probably the people who paid for the painting and donated it to their church.

Donors appear often in altarpieces. They were the only portraits in art and, while recognisable, were done simply using a reverent pose. Campin was the first to paint real portraits, attempting to depict the character of people. His *Portrait of a Woman* is, once again, stunning in the display of materials, but more so in the individuality of the face.



Robert Campin, *Portrait of a Woman*, 1435 (National Gallery, London)

Jan van Eyck (1385 – 1441)

Van Eyck revolutionised oil painting. Bartolommeo Fazio, a humanist scholar for the King of Naples, called him “*the leading painter of our time*” for his technical accomplishments, his truth to nature and the rediscovery of pigments written about by Pliny. Van Eyck’s skill gave his paintings a jewel-like quality which reproduction loses. His works seem to emit light from within. When people first saw his oil paintings van Eyck was declared a magician and a necromancer. He saw things with wonderful sharpness and with a great sense of their beauty, yet his light is soft and radiant – as can be seen in *Annunciation*.



Jan van Eyck, *Annunciation*, c 1434



Jan van Eyck, *The Madonna of the Church*, c 1438

He was the first artist to show architecture accurately. Like all Flemish artists Jan loved detail: the church floor of *Annunciation* has scenes from the bible and the signs of the Zodiac. Great detail appears in van Eyck's *Madonna of the Church*, as well as wonderful light. Behind Mary is her statue between two candles.

Jan's famous masterpiece, painted with his brother Hubert, in which oils give wonderful effects, is the *Ghent Altarpiece*. Christ is flanked by the Virgin Mary and St John the Baptist. At the extremes and in striking contrast to the rest of the surface are Adam and Eve - strikingly naturalistic, not at all influenced by Classical sculpture. Their warm, breathing, flesh-and-blood appearance is enhanced by simulated relief carvings above them of the sacrifice and murder of Abel. The lower register of the *Ghent Altarpiece* depicts paradise. The towers and spires include those of Utrecht Cathedral and the Church of St Nicholas in Ghent; all redeemed by the blood of Christ, depicted as a lamb. The wealth of the patrons and of Ghent derived from the wool trade, so the lamb has a worldly as well as a spiritual significance.



Hubert and Jan van Eyck, *Ghent Altarpiece* (open), completed 1432, St Bavo Cathedral, Ghent



Hubert and Jan van Eyck, *The Almighty*, detail of *Ghent Altarpiece*

Most of the time triptych altarpieces were closed, opened only on special occasions. In modern museums the scenes painted on the closed doors is rarely seen. Sculptures “in stone colour” (as Durer put it, *grisaille* is a term invented later) became usual for exteriors of folding altarpieces. Bosch, notably, would depart from that norm.

On the closed doors, the van Eycks show the Annunciation. Through the windows is a townscape, and the donors are shown below, kneeling before the Saints John who are painted in *grisaille*. Sometimes in the North, the interiors of altarpieces were carved from wood and the closed doors painted. The altarpiece at Chartreuse de Champnol in Dijon is a fine example.

Jan’s best-known work, riddled with superbly painted objects signifying hope for a successful marriage, is *Giovanni Arnolfini and his Wife*. The joined hands, fittingly enough, provide a pivot for the beautifully balanced work.

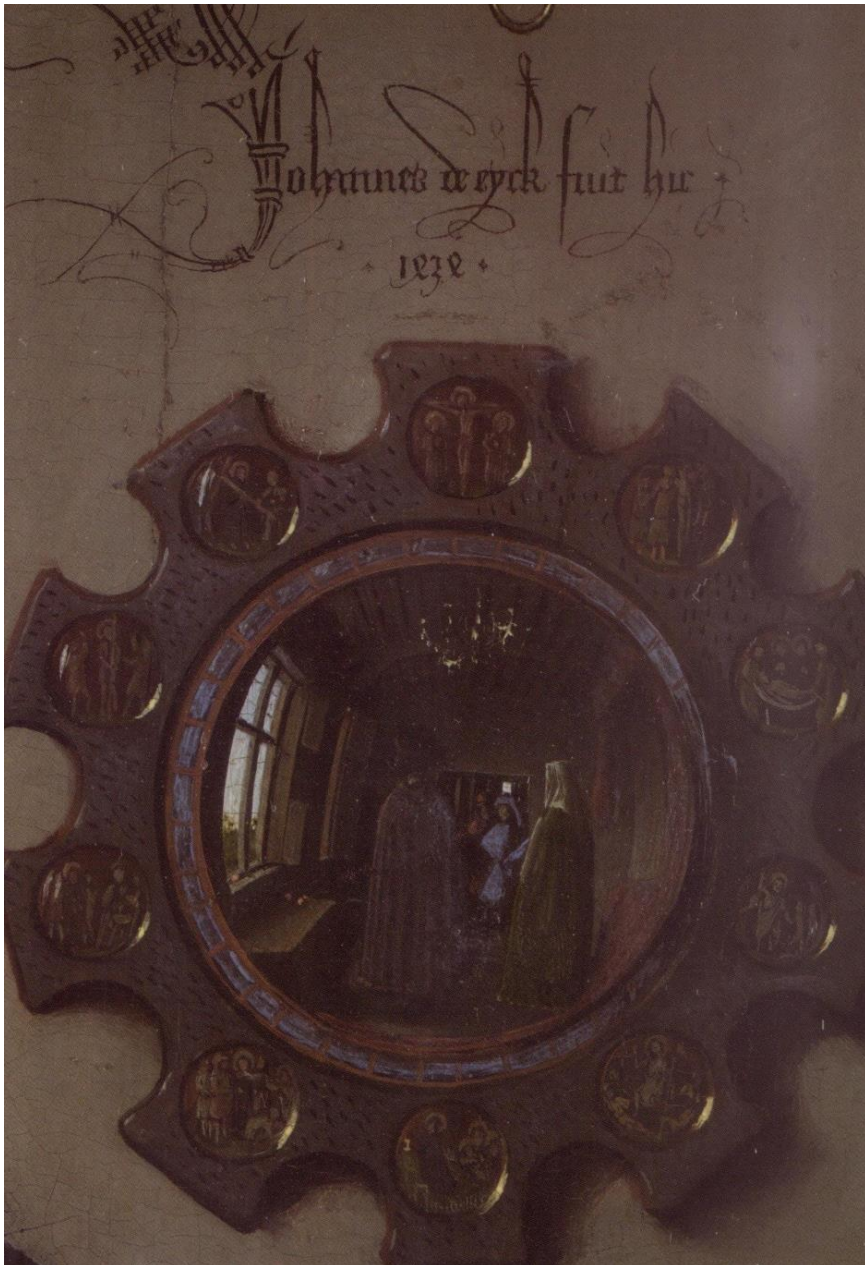


Hubert and Jan van Eyck, *Ghent Altarpiece* (closed)



Jan van Eyck *Giovanni Arnolfini and his Wife* 1435

The mirror in the background is the first of many in Western art which intrigue viewers. The details are difficult to discern in the National Gallery in London (without attracting the zealous attention of staff). A close-up photograph gives a better view. The mirror does not appear to show the artist. Instead, the Arnolfinis seem to be standing in front of a couple, the figure in blue looks like a woman, so perhaps one set of parents? Around the mirror appear scenes from the Passion, above which is Jan's signature.



Jan van Eyck, *Giovanni Arnolfini and his Wife (detail)*, 1435

Rogier van der Weyden (1399/1400 – 1464)

Rogier van der Weyden was the most influential Northern artist of the first half of the 15th century. When he was already an established painter, Rogier studied under Jan van Eyck and Robert Campin. He was their superior in conveying emotion, an expertise which shines in his portraits.

Magdalen is delicate, yet her absorption in the book she is reading is clear. The painting shows van der Weyden's marvellous skills – wonderful colour, beautiful rendering of textures and hard surfaces; even the nails in the floorboards can be seen. The work is uncluttered, beautiful and compelling.



Rogier van der Weyden, *Magdalen Reading*, 1438 (National Gallery, London)

His delicate modelling and gentle contours give nearly all his portraits an aristocratic air. The young lady below is evidently well born to the tips of her exquisitely manicured fingers. Her downward gaze, the full lips and delicately clasped hands suggest sensitivity. She is shown in a three-quarters view: a pose preferred by Flemish 15th century artists, which included the hands. The Italians maintained their tradition of portraits in profile, originating in Roman coins and medallions. The Flemish pose introduces (as did slight turns in Roman busts) a sense of animation.



Rogier van der Weyden, *Portrait of a Lady*, c 1455 (National Gallery of Art, Washington DC)

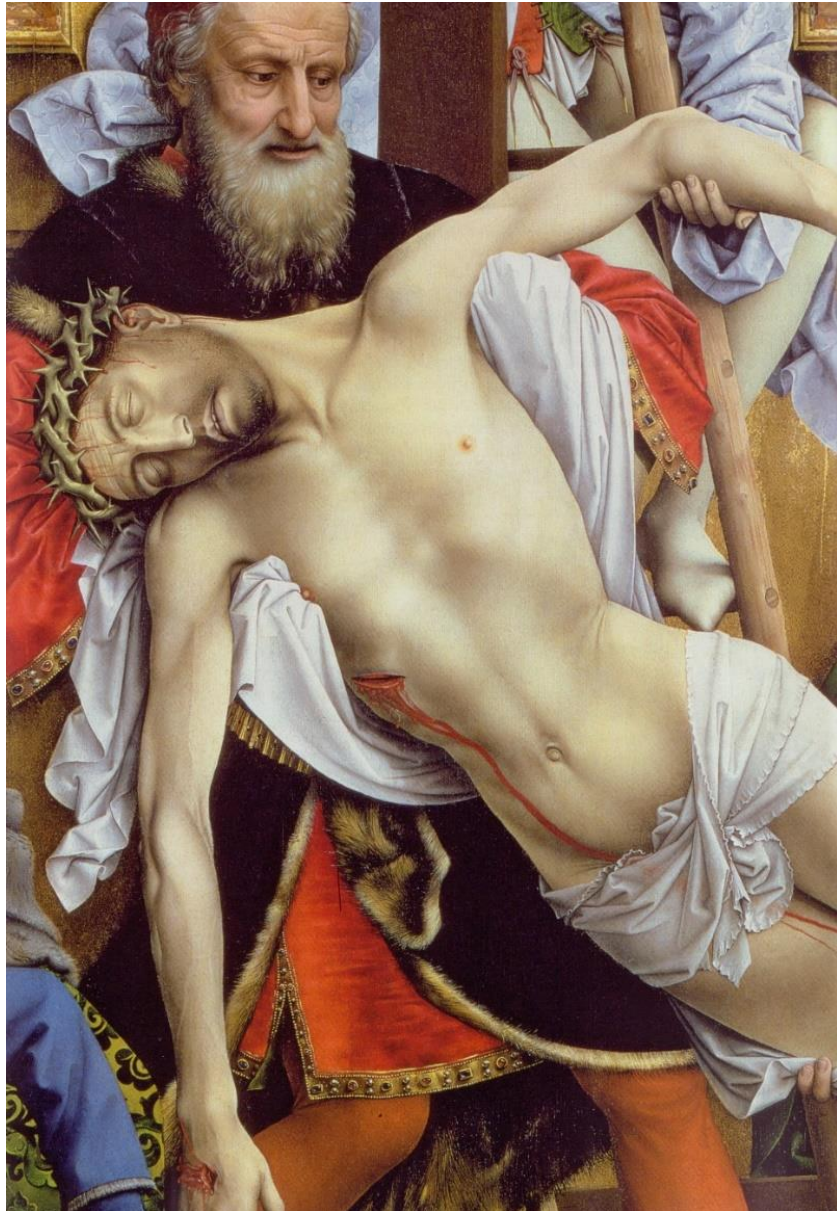
Van der Weyden's first painting after leaving Campin was *The Descent from the Cross*. Van der Weyden shows he is a master of expressing human emotion, much more so than van Eyck and Campin. In *Descent* he explores all the various forms of grief from quiet anguish to fevered abandon. The scholar Bartolommeo Fazio dedicated several chapters of his *De Viris Illustribus* ("Concerning Famous Men") published in 1456 to painters, sculptors, and to the Flemish works of art he had seen. Fazio marvelled over the emotive qualities of Rogier's *Descent*, "grief and tears are so represented you would not think them other than real."

The work was painted for the chapel of the Crossbowmen's Guild of Leuven, and is a masterpiece of composition and colour. The Virgin's pose mirrors that of the dead Christ because she was believed to have suffered the same pain at the crucifixion. The pose is relevant to Rogier's patrons, resembling the shape of a crossbow. Tiny crossbows can be seen hanging from the traceries in the corners. Van der Weyden's art often seems to be a living chain of figures thrown across the picture frame, joined by repetition and variation in an uninterrupted flow of energy. Rogier may be said to have introduced rhythm into 15th century Flemish art. Movement is evident, in contrast to Van Eyck's static art, and forms are linked by colour and shape.



Rogier van der Weyden, *The Descent from the Cross*, 1435-38 (Prado, Madrid)

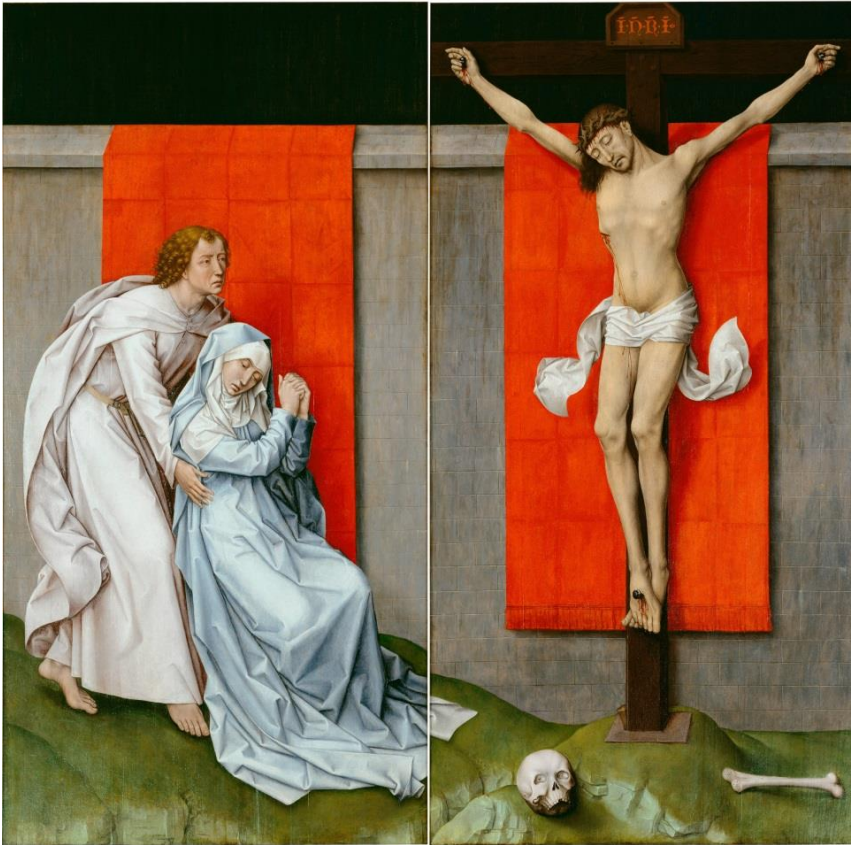
Van der Weyden's magnificent talent can be seen in the central part of *Descent from the Cross*: the grey of Christ's dead flesh compared to the warmth of the supporting hand; wonderful textures flesh, blood, fur, veins, velvet, jewels, wrinkles, wood, hair and shadows.



Rogier used novel compositions for standard religious scenes. The *Philadelphia Crucifixion* is bare and without the usual background landscape. Attention is fixed on Christ, emphasised by the red cloth which is patterned with crosses. The gentle cool colours of Mary and Joseph create a wonderful contrast.

Rogier's Madonna's were also more animated and expressive than Jan van Eyck's, and with robes which are less complicated in their folds and creases, but seem to form a more realistic volume. All this can be seen in the *Duran Madonna*. A painting in which Van der Weyden introduced a niche or portal view, which influenced later Netherlandish artists.

The *Miraflores Altarpiece* shows how Rogier developed the device. Three scenes from Christ's life are shown each with six scenes around the edge of their portal. In the last, various scenes of triumph over death (David over Goliath, Samson over the lion, and Christ and the devil) are depicted. *Miraflores* once more shows Rogier's wonderful composition and line, and the expression of emotion. Mary clutches Christ's body tightly, desperate in grief; and she is surprised and shocked by his resurrection. Colour is restricted, but expressive. Mary appears in white for purity at the birth, red for compassion as she nurses Christ and blue for perseverance when Christ arises from death.



Rogier van der Weyden, *Crucifixion (Philadelphia)* c 1460



Rogier van der Weyden, *Duran Madonna*, c 1436



Rogier van der Weyden, *Miraflores Altarpiece* c 1440

Jan van Eyck and Rogier Van der Weyden set the pattern for northern painting until the first decades of the 16th century. They set standards never exceeded by their immediate successors in the Low Countries, even though many of these artists had great ability: Petrus Christus, Dieric Bouts, Hugo van der Goes and Hans Memling being the foremost.

All manner of Flemish art was exported across Europe and valued by Italians. Until the late 15th century, the flow of art was north to south. Then, as Italian painting developed, the influence of art turned.

Italian painting - Florence

Religious images were introduced into churches because illiterate people could learn the scriptures from them, which arouse devotion better than words and are easier to remember. In 1450 the Archbishop of Florence denounced irrelevant images in pictures: “*midwives at the Nativity ... monkeys ... dogs chasing hares and so on, or gratuitously elaborate costumes*”. Even before the Protestant Reformation, monks tightened up the rules of their orders and exhorted more intense devotion.

Fra Angelico (c 1395/1400 – 1455)

The demand for religious painting which was memorably clear and spiritually stimulating was answered by Fra Angelico, known also as Fra Giovanni da Fiesole, of the Dominican Order. All his work is religious, and much was produced in Florence where he was a prior for three years. Fra Angelico was humble and modest and it was said that he would not take up his brushes without a prayer. In the cells of his San Marco monastery he oversaw the painting of frescoes. Only six of the 43 are solely Fra Angelico’s work. Each fresco was placed on the window wall opposite the door thus forming two openings, one to the spiritual and one to the physical world. They were meant as aids to meditation, dominating each cell.



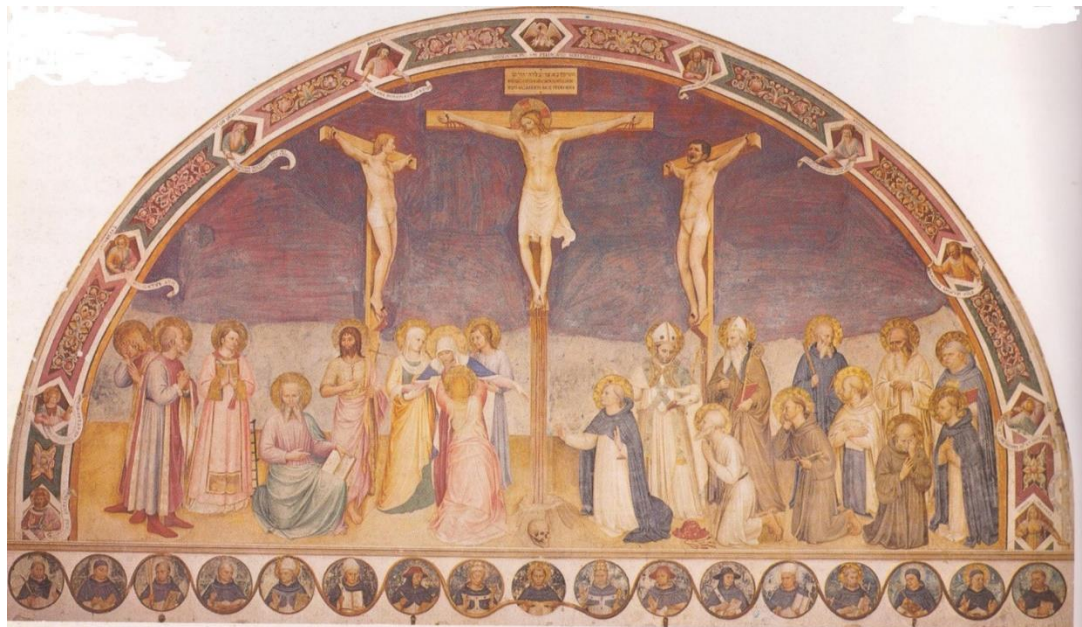
Fra Angelico, *Noli Me Tangere*, 1440-41, fresco, San Marco, Cell 1, Florence



Fra Angelico, *Annunciation*, 1440-41, fresco, San Marco, Cell 3, Florence.

Noli Me Tangere (Touch Me Not) is the only fresco showing nature: a plethora of minutely observed flowers, grasses and trees. Mary Magdalene is graceful and Jesus is gentle, their heads are emphasised against an immediate flat background. Perhaps the most beautiful work is *Annunciation*. Fra Angelico painted the Virgin kneeling in submission, a sublime model of humility and obedience for the friar who lived in the cell. Light and shadow, linear perspective and delicate colour combine to show the figures “*as if actually present*” beyond the cell wall.

The *Crucifixion* fresco was ordered by Cosimo de’ Medici for the chapter house at San Marco. Popes, cardinals, bishops, saints and masters of theology who had been members of the Dominican Order feature in the lower frieze. To one side of the cross are saints who had founded or been heads of religious orders. The prophets appear in the arched border with quotes from the scriptures. The original blue ground has been removed, but recession is suggested by the diagonal setting of the thieves’ crosses. The Holy Women are wonderfully rendered.



Fra Angelico, *Crucifixion*, 1441-2, fresco, San Marco, Chapter House Florence.



“The golden thread of faith runs through Angelico’s work. There is no painter whose images are more exactly calculated to encourage meditation and to foster the moral values which lie at the centre of the spiritual life (Pope-Hennessy).” Pope Nicholas V evidently agreed, calling Fra Angelico to paint frescoes in his chapel. The *Saint Lawrence* was the climax of this work in Rome. The background emphasises the saint; whose form pretty much is repeated in the architecture. The figures beautifully arranged around the saint seem more solid and realistic than in Fra Angelico’s earlier works. Apart from frescos, Fra Angelico painted in tempera. Vasari claimed Fra Angelico’s *Deposition* was *“painted by a saint or an angel.”*



Fra Angelico, *Saint Lawrence distributing Alms*, 1449, fresco, Chapel of Nicholas V, Vatican.



Fra Angelico, *Deposition from the Cross*, c 1432-34 (tempera) (National Museum of San Marco, Florence)

Fra Filippo Lippi (c 1406-1469)

Fra Filippo Lippi was contemporary with Fra Angelico but was not a good monk. An orphan at two, his aunt struggled to bring him up so sent him, at the age of 8, to be a friar at the Carmelite Convent. Filippo had no time for books; “instead of studying he spent his time scrawling pictures on his own books and those of others (Vasari)”.



Fra Filippo Lippi, *Barbadori Altarpiece*, 1438 (tempera)

Despairing, the prior allowed Filippo to go every day to the Carmine chapel, recently painted by Masaccio. Filippo initially adopted the master's forms (it was said Masaccio's soul had entered into Filippo's body). The heavy figures of Mary and Jesus, compared to the rest, attest to this in the *Barbadori Altarpiece*.

Filippo was released from the convent only to be captured by Barbary pirates from whom he obtained release by painting a portrait of the captain. Back in Florence he worked for Cosimo de Medici and the two became close friends. This *Annunciation* was painted for the family. Filippo's figures are now more graceful. The Medici crest of three feathers in a diamond ring can be seen under the vase of lilies.



Fra Filippo Lippi, *Annunciation*, c 1448-50 (tempera)

Filippo's lust for women was great - he could hardly stay at work painting if desire filled him. Cosimo tried locking him up, but Filippo escaped and pursued the women of Florence for days on end. Eventually, Cosimo decided it was better to let Filippo have free rein, and let him paint when he was sated. By every account, Filippo was a happy soul and he seems to have believed saints are happy too. In the companion piece to *Annunciation*, only St Peter Martyr with the hatchet in his head looks glum. The stigmata of St Francis, on the far left, are marked with gold.



Fra Filippo Lippi, *Seven Saints*, c 1448-50 (tempera)

During his amorous adventures Filippo met Lucrezia Buti, a graceful and beautiful novice. He persuaded the nuns to allow her to model for him, which only deepened his infatuation. The *Madonna's* enchanting profile here is believed to Lucrezia's. The painting is described as one of the most admired in the Uffizi. Filippo stole her away from her convent of Santa Margherita and despite her father's attempts she would not leave Filippo. His art was considered of incomparable grace and beauty: Michelangelo sang his praises. Filippo loved to teach painting. One of his pupils was Sandro Botticelli who was clearly influenced by the *Madonna* based on Lucrezia. Filippo's frescoes showing the *Stories of St Stephen and St John the Baptist* at the Cathedral of Prato are considered some of his important works. The figure of Salome, dancing for Herod, also was clearly an influence on Botticelli.



Fra Filippo Lippi, *Madonna and Child with Two Angels*, c 1465 (tempera) (Uffizi, Florence)



Fra Filippo Lippi, *The Feast of Herod*, fresco, c 1460-64

Paolo Uccello (1397 – 1475) was obsessed with solids in space and experimenting with perspective. Vasari lamented if only Uccello had spent as much time on human figures and animals as he spent (and wasted) on perspective he would have been the most imaginative painter since Giotto. Donatello, ace sculptor and close friend, said: “Ah Paolo, this perspective of yours makes you neglect what we know for what we don’t know. These things are of no use except for marquetry.”



Paolo Uccello, *The Battle of San Romano*, 1438-40 (tempera)

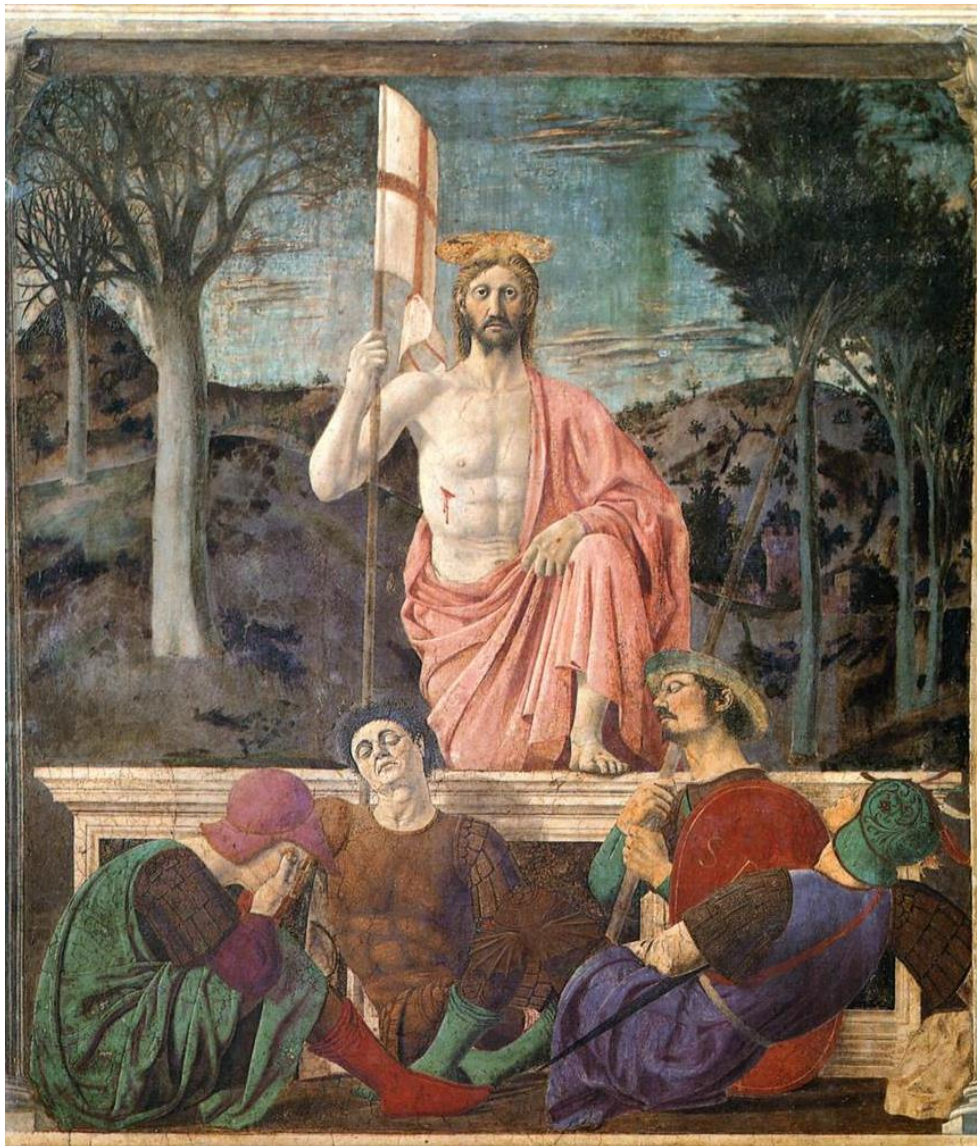
The perspective in Uccello's *Battle* does not extend beyond the foreground, and some elements are academic exercises rather than integrated parts of the picture (the foreshortened dead soldier). Paolo's wife, calling him to bed, got the reply; “Oh, how great is this perspective”. The delights of marriage ignored for his “sweet mistress perspective”. In *San Romano* the price of this obsession claimed by Vasari is hinted at and the older Uccello got the worse his figures became - 30 years later *St George* looks like a *Disney* cartoon.



Paolo Uccello, *St George and the Dragon*, 1470

Piero della Francesca (1406 or 1412 – 1492)

Uccello's fascination with geometry was typical of 15th century artists and shared by Piero della Francesca. However, Piero's art demonstrates a wonderful grasp of colour and light which add a serenity and grace. *The Resurrection* has long been admired as one of Piero's greatest works.



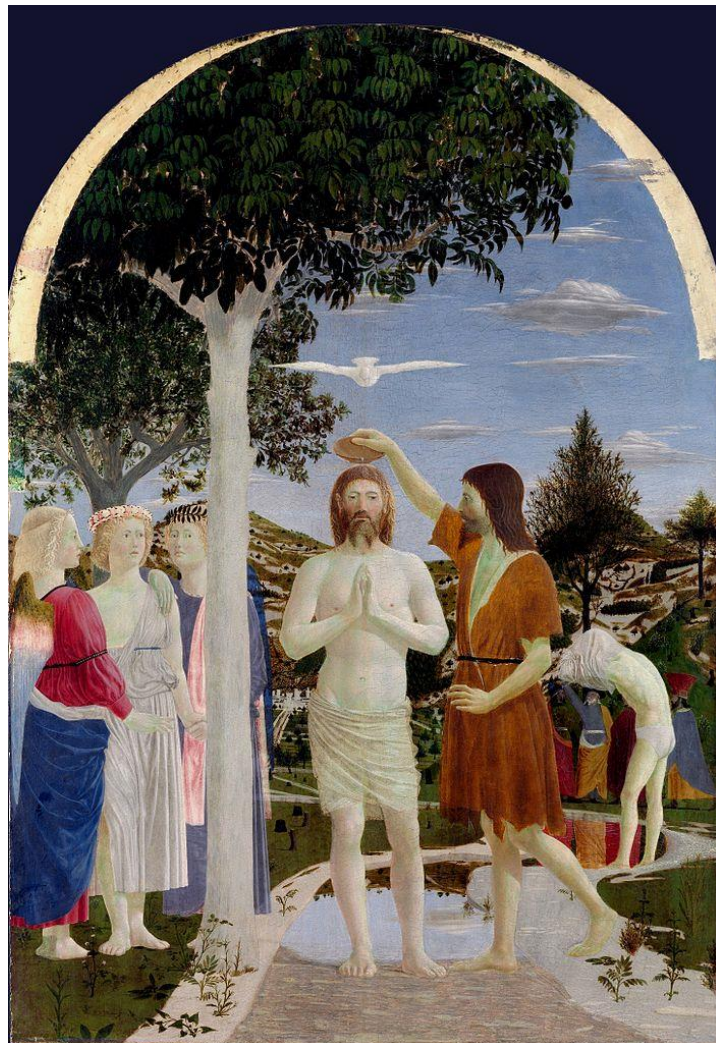
Piero della Francesca, *The Resurrection*, c 1458, tempera and fresco

The recession of the landscape is helped by two rows of trees diminishing in size, a device Piero used often. The top of the sarcophagus and Christ's shoulders split the composition horizontally, but this and the verticals are softened by the pyramid formed by the soldiers, each in a different pose. The contrasts of their colours and textures continue this variety.

In true fresco, pigment is applied to wet plaster to which it binds so that when the plaster dries the pigment is effectively part of the wall. Piero experimented, mixing colours with tempera or with oil. One of his earliest surviving frescoes is *Sigismondo*. Piero used a *spolvero*, or pricked cartoon, on which the entire composition was outlined on parchment in the studio, and then placed on the wall. Coloured powder was pounced through the pricked holes to transfer the outlines to the wall. *Spolveri* allowed greater precision because forms were prepared in the studio and not in haste on wet plaster as is the case with true fresco. They can also be used repeatedly: Piero used one *spolvero* twice (reversed the second time) for angels in *Madonna del Parto*. Pouncing was done when plaster was dry and paint was applied afterwards onto dry plaster (*a secco*). The disadvantage of *a secco* and the *spolvero* technique is that the fresco does not last, as the pigments are not bound deeply into the plaster but only rest on the surface. The difference can be seen: the hands and faces of the two figures and the dogs were done in true fresco; robes and background wall *a secco*. The greyhounds, hunting dogs of the nobility, are simply beautiful: symmetrically posed but with variation and in lovely contrast: the black one's ears are pricked and his attention is clearly off to the right.



Piero della Francesca, *Sigismondo Malatesta in Prayer before His Patron Saint, Sigismund, King of Burgundy*, fresco, 1451



Piero della Francesca, *Baptism of Christ*, c 1445, (tempera)

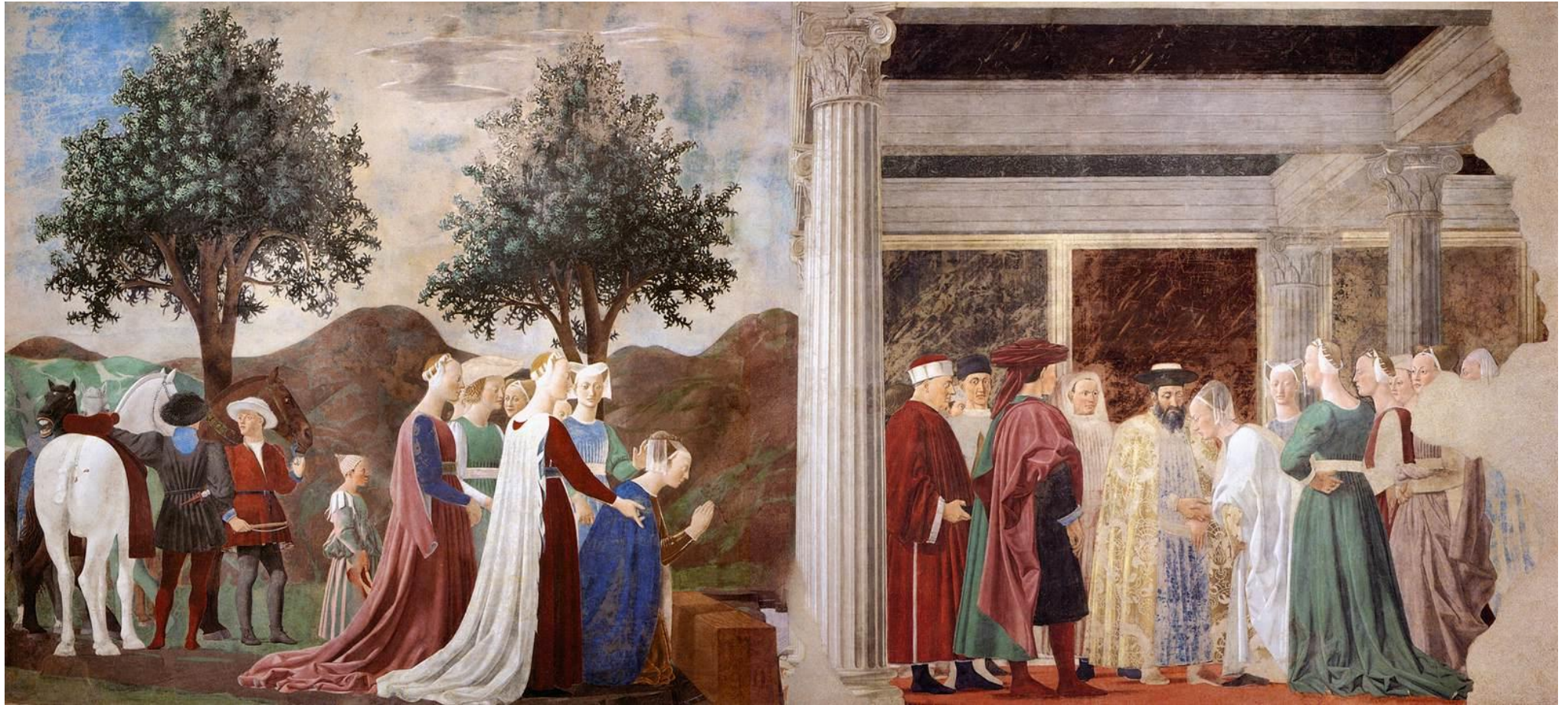
Piero studied arithmetic, algebra and geometry as a youth, as was natural for a merchant's son, but also developed a passion for Euclidean geometry. Piero wrote mathematical treatises, including one on the Golden Section, which was supposed to provide the key to the harmony of the heavens (as Vermeer was to demonstrate later). *Baptism of Christ* is set out mathematically. A scheme of three verticals and a circle can be seen and they give the painting harmony. Piero's interest in optics is shown by the reflections of the landscape and robes in the river which help set a tranquil mood, together with the soft colours.

Indeed, Piero rarely uses strong colours. Instead of pure greens, he uses sage and olive; for pure reds, rust, brick or plum. This lack of strong colour, together with the associated contrasts, helps establish the calm serenity of the *Story of the True Cross* which runs around the walls of the church of St Francis at Arezzo.



Cappella Maggiore, San Francesco, Arezzo

On the bottom right by the window, for example, Constantine is visited by an angel with an image of the cross. Constantine adopted it as his battle symbol and defeated Maxentius; a victory depicted in the lower fresco on the right wall. Above this the Queen of Sheba adores the wood of the cross, and meets Solomon. Frescoes on the left wall depict the discovery of the cross, whose location was found through the interrogation of Judas which involved dipping him into a well (upper left of the window). Piero's signature of alternating warm and cool tones to produce a rhythmic composition appears in many of the larger frescoes; the *Queen of Sheba*.



Piero della Francesca, *Queen of Sheba (from the Story of the True Cross)*, fresco, c 1452-57

Piero mastered perspective and created architectural space. Everything is monumental, even the figures seem motionless and stately. Some art historians consider that they do not look like human beings interacting but are pure forms. This, together with his clever handling of colour, explains why Piero was popular among abstract artists in the 20th century.

In the background of Piero's *Baptism* is a landscape, inspired by the rough hill country surrounding his home town. Landscapes in religious works became more common in Italian painting in the 15th century. Gold backgrounds had been popular for devotional images, Masaccio's *Crucifixion* above, for example, but were abandoned, partly for moral reasons. Conspicuous displays of wealth were made illegal by Sumptuary Laws in Florence, Genoa and Venice. Gold was also in short supply.



Domenico Ghirlandaio, *Adoration of the Shepherds*, fresco, 1483-5, Sassetti Chapel

Domenico Ghirlandaio's *Adoration* shows the Italian adoption of the Flemish practice of a deep landscape as background. The work was inspired by Hugo van der Goes' altarpiece of the same subject which arrived in Florence in 1483. Domenico also follows the Flanders painting by using a contemporary setting. The sarcophagus, columns and arch from Roman antiquity and the shepherds give scene a Tuscan feel. Domenico painted himself as the foremost shepherd – his gesture pointing out the miracle of birth and also that it was he who painted the work. Self-portraits were rare; Sandro may have started the trend.

Sandro Botticelli (c1444 – 1510)

The most famous paintings of this period are Sandro Botticelli's works. Rhythmic sensuous lines, slender graceful figures and a love of beauty are his hallmarks. Born Sandro Filipepi, his elder brother, Giovanni, was nicknamed "Il Botticello" ("little barrel") because of his chubby shape. The name was transferred: "Sandro Mariano Botticello" being cited in documents in 1470. By the time of Sandro's death, Botticelli had become the family surname. Although apprenticed to a goldsmith, Sandro's father soon realised his son was keen on painting, and arranged for him to be placed in Filippo Lippi's workshop, where Sandro stayed from 1461/2 to 1467.

Most of his fame rests on his great mythological scenes, but Sandro began by painting versions of the *Adoration of the Magi*. Florence at the time was effectively ruled by Cosimo de Medici, for whom the Magi had a special significance. Four of Botticelli's paintings of the *Adoration of the Magi* survive. The third was commissioned by Guaspere Del Lama, a broker of the guild of money-changers to which the Medici also belonged. The work was an altarpiece for Del Lama's funerary chapel in Santa Maria Novello and is one of Sandro's finest works.



Sandro Botticelli, *The Adoration of the Magi (for Del Lama)*, c 1475 (tempera) (Uffizi, Florence)

Sandro included portraits of Cosimo de Medici, kneeling to kiss Christ, and his two sons, Piero and Giovanni, kneeling to the lower right of Cosimo. The three form the Magi. They were all dead when the work was painted and the ruler of Florence, Lorenzo the Magnificent, is shown standing directly behind Cosimo, rendered much more handsome than in life. Guiliano, Cosimo's other son, is opposite with dark hair. So that wealthy viewers could recognise the creator of this wondrous painting, Sandro includes a striking self-portrait in the extreme right foreground, staring at us. Vasari said:

"The beauty of the heads that Sandro painted in this picture defies description ...this marvellous painting today amazes every artist by its colouring, its design and its composition."

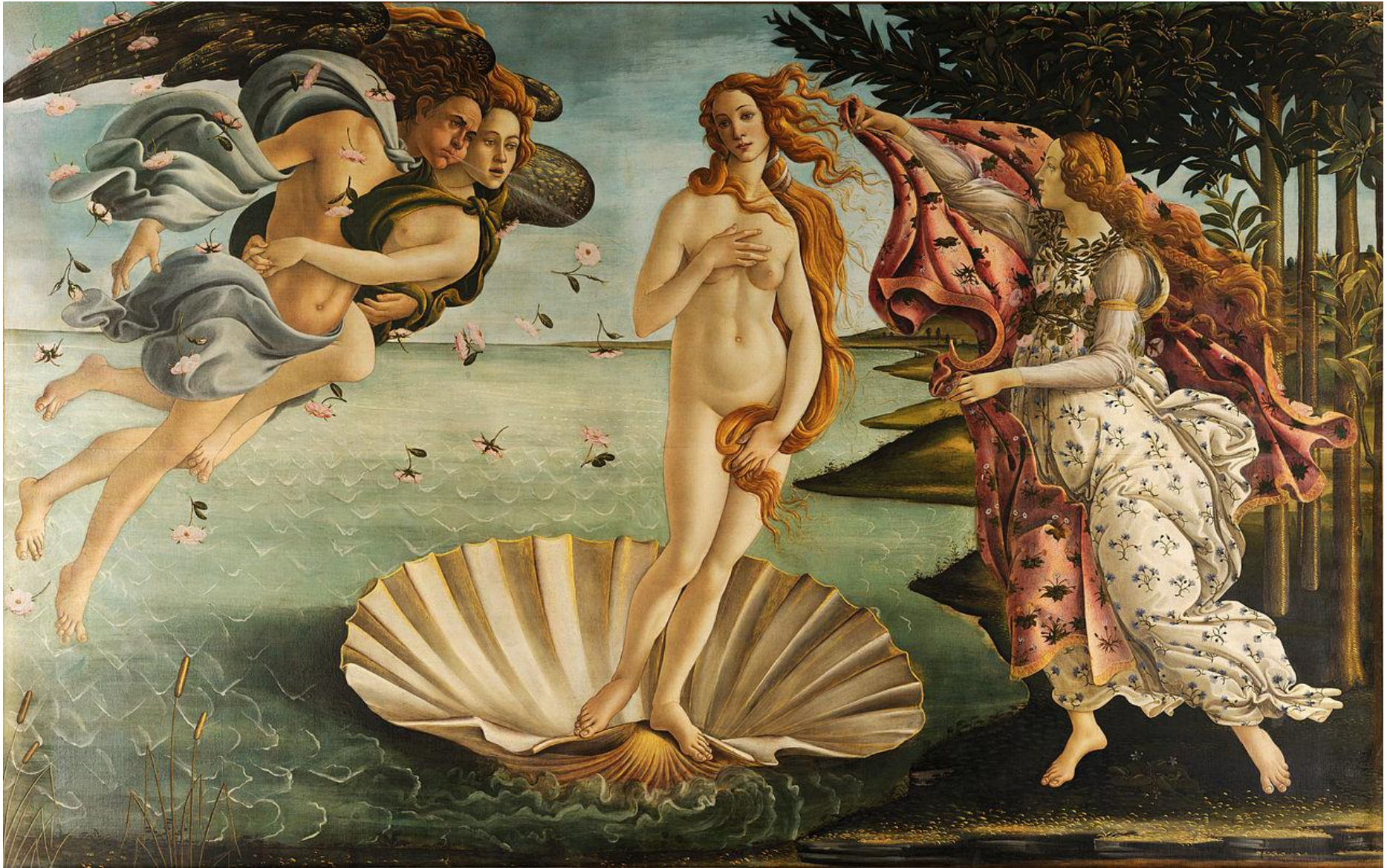
The painting prompted Pope Sixtus IV to commission Sandro to paint the *Trials of Moses* for the newly built Sistine Chapel in Rome. Before Sandro went to Rome, he painted his first mythological scene, *Primavera*. The work was commissioned for Lorenzo de Medici for his town palace. Large artworks in luxurious private homes in the 15th century tended to be Flemish tapestries, which were very expensive, costing much more than paintings. *Primavera*, over 6 feet high, may have been intended as an inexpensive alternative so that Lorenzo did not fall foul of the Sumptuary Laws. The painting shares aspects of Flemish tapestry: a flat composition; the flower-strewn ground and a decorative background; and the bulge in Venus' belly is a conventional feature of full-length women in Flemish art in the 15th century (including *Mrs Arnolfini*.)

Botticelli's exquisite, graceful and rather weightless figures are very different from those of Masaccio and Piero della Francesca. Venus stands in the middle with (left to right) Mercury, the three Graces, Flora, Chloris and Zephyr. *Primavera* was commissioned to celebrate the Lorenzo's marriage. Two marriages are indicated in the work. Cupid aims an arrow at the youngest Grace, Aglaea, who will marry. Zephyr, the west wind and harbinger of Spring, will transform Chloris, the earth nymph, into Flora after he marries her. The impending transformation explains why those two female figures are linked.



Sandro Botticelli, *La Primavera*, c 1478 (oil on panel) (Uffizi, Florence)

The most famous of Botticelli's paintings is the *Birth of Venus*, a work of magnificent elegance and great delicacy. Sandro's mastery of form and colour is evident.



Sandro Botticelli, *The Birth of Venus*, c 1486 (tempera on canvas) (Uffizi, Florence)

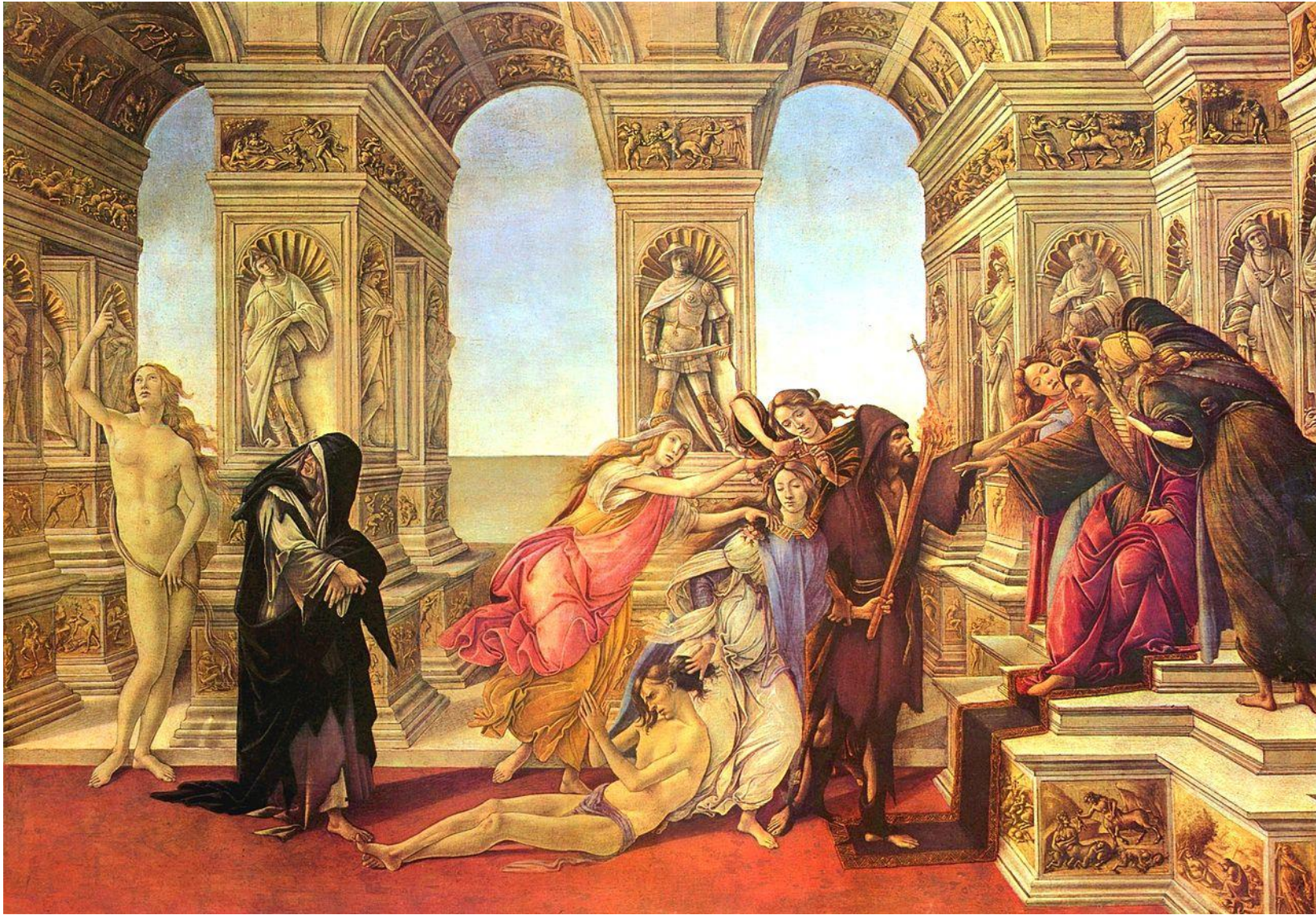
Aphrodite, or Venus, was venerated by the Greeks and Romans, but Christians regarded her as the incarnation of lust. This view lasted well into the 14th century: an antique statue of Venus found in Siena was smashed to pieces in 1357 and its fragments buried. Sandro's *Venus* accords with the canon of ideal beauty of Polyclitus and Praxiteles: equal distance between the breasts; between the navel and the breasts; and between the navel and the crotch. Zephyr appears again - Aura, the light breeze wrapped around him, is unimaginably beautiful. *Mars and Venus*, painted on panel for a large piece of furniture, is another allegory.



Sandro Botticelli, *Mars and Venus*, c 1483 (tempera and oil on panel) (National Gallery, London)

The flow of lines along the limbs of *Mars and Venus*, countered by the straight lance display Botticelli's marvellous eye for composition. The hard, shiny helmet contrasts with the soft folds of the drapery. According to astrology Mars could make men stronger, but Mars' influence is not always beneficial as the border between strength and brute force was a slim one. Venus watches him and curbs his bad influence and can even overcome him. Thus, the painting represents the power of love over strength. Wasps swarm from the tree-trunk on which Mars sleeps, from a spot where the coat of arms of the patron would be placed. Wasps, *vespe* in Italian, might allude to the rich and powerful Vespucci family (whose most famous member was the explorer, Amerigo, who gave his name to the New World). The family were neighbours of the Botticelli and commissioned many works from Sandro, perhaps this one too. Wasps might also suggest the sting associated with love.

The last secular painting produced by Botticelli was the *Calumny of Apelles*, an “unimaginably beautiful painting”, said Vasari.



Sandro Botticelli, *The Calumny of Apelles*, c 1494

The work is based on a description of a painting by Apelles, a Greek painter. A Greek counterpart wrote *On Calumny*:

On the right sits Midas with very large ears of an ass, extending his hand to Slander ... Near him stand two women—Ignorance and Suspicion. Slander is coming up, a woman beautiful beyond measure, but full of malignant passion and excitement, evincing as she does fury and wrath by carrying in her left hand a blazing torch [which will kindle the fires of hatred and revenge] and with the other dragging by the hair a young man who stretches out his hands to heaven and calls the gods to witness his innocence. She is conducted by a pale ugly man who has piercing eye and looks as if he had wasted away in long illness; he represents envy (or Rancour) [and he shoots out his hand with its sharp nails to Midas's eyes to blind them to the truth]. There are two women in attendance to Slander, one is Fraud and the other Conspiracy (or Perfidy). They are followed by a woman dressed in deep mourning, with black clothes all in tatters—she is Repentance (or Remorse). At all events, she is turning back with tears in her eyes and casting a stealthy glance, full of shame, at Truth, who is slowly approaching

Truth on the left is depicted naked, an old adage of classical origin. *Calumny* fore-shadows the style of Sandro's late secular paintings with its small and slender figures full of action set against an architectural background, but more of that later. Amid these secular wonders, Botticelli continued to produce religious images. This *tondo*, his most famous, is regarded as his best picture of the Virgin.



Sandro Botticelli, *Madonna of the Magnificat*, c 1480-81 (Uffizi, Florence)

The *Madonna* is writing the *Magnificat*. She has, on the left-hand page, penned lines from the Song of Zacharias, which tells of the birth of St John the Baptist the protector of Florence. Christ holds a pomegranate, symbol of the Passion. Botticelli used much gold in this work. Also shining through is his ever-constant love of beauty, and his command over line, form and colour. Mary's features, her hair and lips and delicate details of the gorgeous pink scarf, are especially entrancing. The transparent veils, learned from Filippo Lippi appear. The curve of the tondo is repeated in the outline of Mary (head, back, left arm).

Sandro produced many smaller paintings of the Madonna and Child and his compositions proved so popular they were copied widely. The *Madonna della Melagrana* is one of the last paintings in which Sandro lavishes his care on the representation of rich and delicate fabrics, their patterns and transparency, and the different effects depending on the way they fall. The radiance of gold creates an atmosphere of heavenly light. The angels, two of whom look at us to draw us into the picture, have varied faces. On the stole of the left-most angel appear words which must have been murmured often in front of the painting; *Ave Grazia Plena*.



Sandro Botticelli, *Madonna della Melagrana*, c 1487 (Uffizi, Florence)

The final large paintings Botticelli produced reflect developments in Florence late in the 1490s. The city was threatened by a French invasion, the two branches of the Medici family turned on themselves, producing strife in the city and disrupting trade. The corrupt pope and curia exacted much money from the city and famine struck. In 1494 the Medici regime was overthrown, and the hatred felt for their 60 years of rule gushed out. The prior of San Marco, Savonarola, became the effective leader of Florence. He set up a council of 3,200 citizens, which (among other things) introduced equitable taxation and was widely acclaimed. However, Savonarola was burned as a heretic in 1498. His trial was rigged by leading Florentine families threatened by the popular republican government; they snatched back power. Sandro's last two large works underline the preference for republicanism instead of the tyranny of the Medici or the Oligarchy and lamented Savonarola's unfair trial.

Virginia fell victim to a wicked member of the tyrannical board of ten leading men (the *Decemviri*), which abused the power that had been entrusted to it in Rome. Virginia, wearing an olive-green dress with a red mantle, appears on first on the left with her father pleading for her release, then in the centre in front of Appius Claudius, the judge, and on the right being killed and her father fleeing on horseback. The revolt of the army on hearing the unfair judgement is depicted in the centre foreground.



Sandro Botticelli, *History of Virginia*, 1496-1504

Lucretia was raped by Tarquin, brutal son of a tyrannical king: the scene on the left. The violation induces Lucretia to kill herself (a scene often depicted in art: Paolo Veronese was to paint a beautifully expressive picture of the moment just after she had plunged the dagger into her heart). She falls into the arms of her husband, Brutus, on the right.



Sandro Botticelli, *History of Lucretia*, 1496-1504

In *Lucretia*, the main scene shows the victim on her funeral bier with Brutus calling for vengeance, surrounded by angry soldiers and mourning women. These paintings represent the popular lament at the execution of Savonarola, and the end of republican government in Florence. They express hope that this government might return: the revolt of citizen-soldiers at the terrible demise of Lucretia led to the introduction of republican government in ancient Rome; their rebellion against Virginia's treatment restored it. These two paintings continue Sandro's later style which started in *Calumny*; slender figures silhouetted against classical architecture with the emphasis on movement and expression.

Sandro remained a bachelor, claiming to a friend that the idea of marriage gave him nightmares:

"Let me tell you something that happened one night not so long ago. I dreamt I had taken a wife, and it troubled me so much that I woke up. So that I wouldn't fall back to sleep and have the same dream, I got up and spent the whole night wandering the streets of Florence like a madman."

Nonetheless, Sandro may have fallen in love as a young man with Simonetta Vespucci, a married noblewoman who lived next door and who was regarded as the greatest beauty in Florence. She died in 1476, aged only 23, when Sandro was in his late twenties. When Sandro died 34 years later, he was buried as he had requested at her feet in the Vespucci chapel.

Piero di Cosimo (1462 – 1521)

Piero di Cosimo lived in Florence all his life, but not as an intimate in the Medici court as was Botticelli. Vasari described him as *"a spirit set apart and very different from other painters ... wildly inventive and fanciful"*. Like Sandro, Piero painted religious scenes, but was fascinated by mythological creatures and his art is touched with the psychological.



Piero di Cosimo, *The Visitation with St Nicholas and St Anthony Abbott*, c 1490

In *Visitation*, the Virgin Mary meets her elderly cousin Elizabeth, both miraculously pregnant, the latter with John the Baptist. The saints in the foreground are bent to their literature. Above St Anthony a furious scene shows the massacre of innocents, and above St Nicholas a quiet nativity. Are these landscapes real or in the minds of the saints as they write and read? A grotesque landscape appears in *Perseus*, even drawing the eye away from the astonishing sea monster. Exotic details such as turbaned figures and musical instruments without strings or sound-boxes explain Vasari's comment on "the strangeness of Piero's brain".



Piero di Cosimo, *Perseus Liberating Andromeda*, c 1510 – 1515

Piero was fascinated by animals and primitive creatures (fauns, satyrs), anything in the untamed world. Piero “*was content to see everything run wild, like his own nature ... he would never let his garden be dug or the fruit trees pruned*”, bemoaned Vasari. Di Cosimo’s love of animals and atmospheric landscapes is manifest in the *Death of Procris*, a tale from Ovid warning of the danger of mutual mistrust within marriage. The panel may have been painted for a wedding chest.



Piero di Cosimo, *The Death of Procris*, 1500

The painting uses the language of alchemy, a subject in which Piero was fascinated. The brown dog represents Hermes Trismegistus, inventor and patron of the art of alchemy and a guide to the realm of the dead. Although producing gold from lead caught the headlines, the true aim of alchemy was immortality. Illustrations in 15th century treatises of alchemy commonly showed a corpse pierced with Hermes’ arrow, growing out of which is a small tree, representing the death of matter being followed by resurrection. In this painting Piero shows Hermes watching as a small tree freshly sprouts up directly above Procris’s heart. Rather than being an illustration of Ovid’s tale, the work signifies alchemy’s victory over death: Cephalus, her lover, looks more hopeful than bereft.

Venice and Northern Italy

Andrea Mantegna (1431-1506)

St Sebastian, by Andrea Mantegna emphasises many of the characteristics which had emerged in Italian art in the previous four decades: spatial clarity by means of perspective; naturalistic landscape background; classical architectural and decorative motifs; and, an idealised human being all but nude. As in many 15th century religious paintings, Mantegna shows the pagan world symbolically in ruins: Christianity prevails over human ills and disasters.

Mantegna was influenced by classical antiquities in Venice, where he married the daughter of Jacopo Bellini whose drawings of classical buildings were noted for their precision. Vasari wrote:

“Mantegna always maintained that the good antique statues were more perfect and beautiful than anything in Nature. He believed that the masters of antiquity had combined in one figure the perfections which are rarely found together in one individual.”

Mantegna practised drawing from sculpted models and manikins draped in stiffened cloth. *St Sebastian* certainly seems to be carved out of some hard and flawless marble.

This image of St Sebastian, often invoked against the plague, may well have been connected with an epidemic which ravaged Padua, then Andrea's place of work, in 1456-57. The classical allusions are completed by Mantegna signing the work in Greek. The rider in the cloud (top left) has been variously identified as Saturn or Theodoric of Verona (lured to the gates of hell by a stag he chased).

Andrea produced other versions of St Sebastian, and his feeling for sculpture remained strong because of his training, copying statues and reliefs. Many of Mantegna's paintings look like the low-relief of Ghiberti's sculpted panels for the doors. From a young age Andrea developed a love of marble, which is reflected by the painted backgrounds of simulated marble in many of his works.

Samson and Delilah is an example. Inscribed on the tree trunk, just below the cut branch, is *Foemina Diabolo tribus assibus est male peior* – “a bad woman is three times worse than the devil”. The idea, and this wording, occurs repeatedly in medieval proverbs and fairy tales.



Andrea Mantegna, *St Sebastian*, c 1456-59
(tempera)



Andrea Mantegna, *Samson and Delilah*, c1500 (glue tempera on canvas)

The *Cult of Cybele* is a famous relief-like painting. The left half has a background of fiery red marble and the right pale yellow. *Cybele* has beautiful highlights and a flow across the canvas, with the light-toned figure on the left starting the action. The procession is countered by the devotee leaning to the left and the priest looking back. Both are yellowish grey in tint, thus standing out from the cool white-grey of the other figures. The stunning light helps to generate the low-relief effect.

The work was produced for the San Polo palace of Francesco Cornaro, the greatest and wealthiest Venetian Patriarch of his day. The Cornaro family considered themselves descendants of a famous Roman clan that included Scipio Africanus who defeated Hannibal. Mantegna died before being able to complete the other panel designed to go with *Cybele*. His brother-in-law, Giovanni Bellini, finished the job by painting the panel depicting an *Episode from the life of Publius Cornelius Scipio*.



Andrea Mantegna, *Introduction of the Cult of Cybele to Rome*, 1505-6 (glue tempera on canvas)

Andrea Mantegna was born of humble peasant stock, son of a carpenter. He was taken to nearby Padua to learn painting with Jacopo Squarcione, who adopted him as his son. Mantegna's first notable work was a series of frescoes of martyrdoms for the Ovetari Chapel of the church of Eremitani in Padua. In one of the great losses to Italian art, these frescoes were destroyed by Allied bombing in 1944, so only black-and-white photographs of them remain. The commission, under which Mantegna worked with Niccolo Pizzolo, brought him fame and trouble.

Mantegna's frescoes use the technique he developed of *di sotto in su* (from below to above) - figures foreshortened and designed to be seen from below. Andrea was given the responsibility for *St James Led to His Execution* when Pizzolo was killed in a brawl in 1453. Andrea himself was temperamental. He had two rivals beaten up by ten men, was quick to go to court over slights and broke agreements to increase his fee as he worked on commissions. Among the consequences of Mantegna's wonderful frescoes at Ovetari was a break with his teacher. Jacopo Bellini, seeing Andrea's promise, promoted marriage with his daughter, Nicolosia. Bellini was a fierce rival of Squarcione, so this marriage was bound to cause trouble. Mantegna took legal measures to dissolve the adoption. Squarcione responded by fiercely criticising Mantegna's work, maintaining that imitating sculptures was no way to portray flesh.



Andrea Mantegna, *St James Led to His Execution*, c 1455 (photograph of fresco)

The Eremitani frescoes prompted the Gonzaga family to invite Mantegna to be their court painter in Mantua. Mantegna started by decorating a chamber on the first floor of the tower of the Castello di San Giorgio. The walls were painted with scenes of the Gonzaga family. The ceiling has a dramatic *di sotto in su* decoration which would influence Western art for three centuries.



Andrea Mantegna, *Ceiling of Camera Degli Sposi*, Ducal Palace Mantua, fresco, c 1465-74

Mantegna's innovations in viewpoint and perspective are more effective than Uccello's as they add to the power and spectacle of the scene, rather than being academic. Indeed, Andrea put aside mathematical accuracy for effectiveness: *Christ's* head is strictly too large, but the image is compelling.

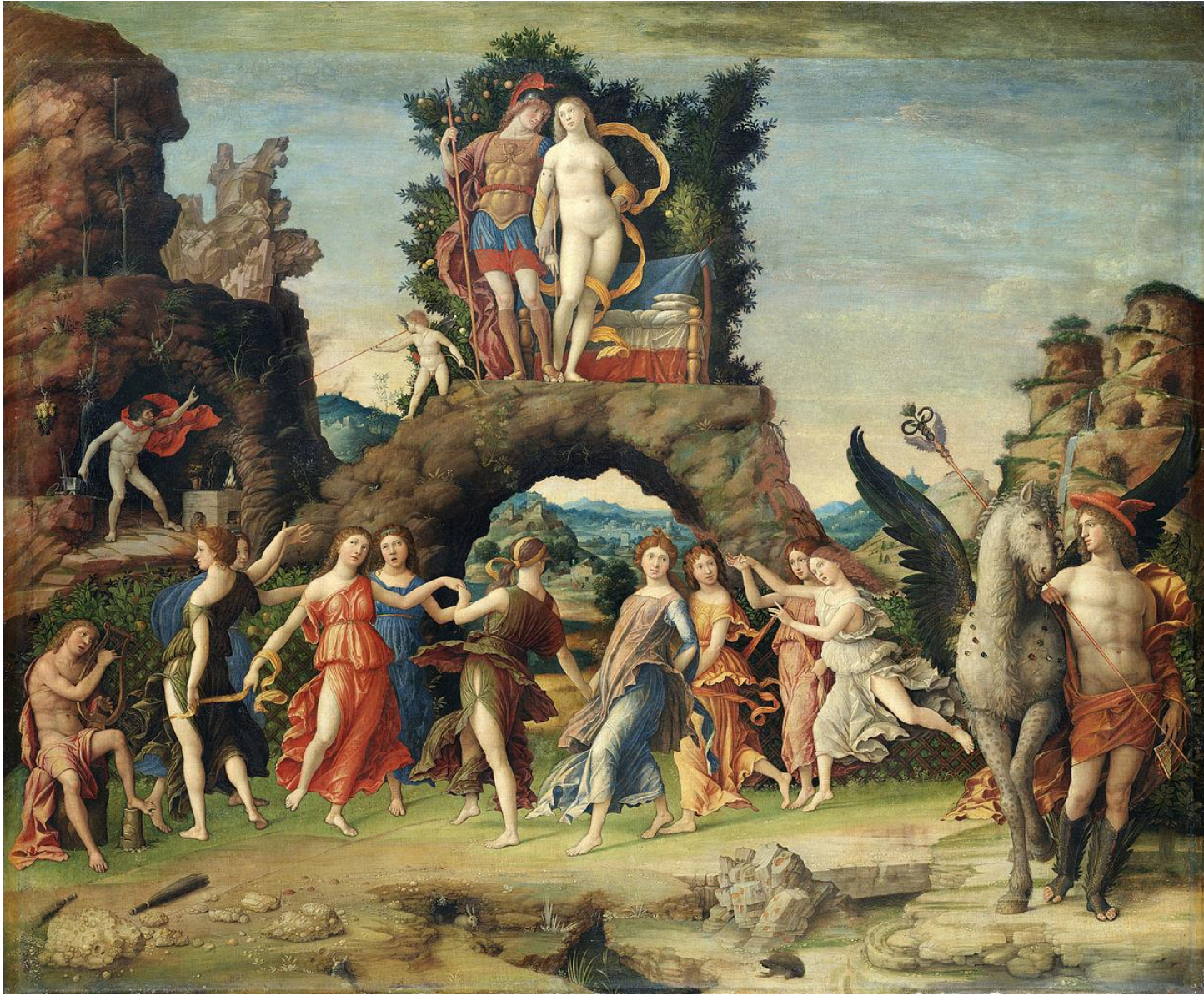


Andrea Mantegna, *Lamentation over the Dead Christ*, c 1475-78 (tempera on canvas)

Mantegna painted many works for the Gonzaga family. His original patron, Lodovico, was succeeded by his son, Federico, who died suddenly in 1484. Then Francesco came to power. Unlike his father and grandfather, he was far more interested in warfare, jousts and improving his stud of horses than art. Isabella d'Este was now the intellectual force of the Gonzaga household, and created a studio for her private studies of the arts. Isabella was an august woman, used to having her way, and she ran into difficulties when trying to impose strict instructions on equally (if not more) august painters. Giovanni Bellini twice refused her. However, Andrea produced two paintings for Isabella's studio, the first being *Parnassus*.

Apollo plays his lyre and the Nine Muses dance in a secluded retreat undisturbed by the vulgar herd; an apt metaphor for Isabella's studio. Mercury invented the lyre, which he gave to Apollo, and was the god of eloquence. Pegasus was a symbol of poetry. Venus and Mars appear, and Vulcan can be seen in his forge. There is much mythological symbolism. The hares and the squirrel, however, rather than symbols, show that timid creatures could enjoy the peace and tranquillity that prevail in the Muses' retreat. This is one of the few paintings that Andrea uses aerial perspective – the blue of the distant hills.

Andrea suffered from poor health late in life; severe illnesses plagued him from 1504, and he was on the point of death for some days in 1505. He died (deeply in debt) in 1506. The admiration he evoked began to wane after the early 16th century. Even in the 19th century, the Pre-Raphaelites were condemned for preferring Mantegna (and Botticelli) to Raphael, but Burne-Jones revived interest in Andrea's art. Only in the 20th century was Andrea Mantegna restored to his true position as a prince of painters in his own age.



Andrea Mantegna, *Parnassus*, 1497 (tempera and gold on canvas)

Giovanni Bellini (c 1427 – 1516)

Giovanni Bellini, the greatest Venetian painter of his time, was the son of Jacopo who spotted Mantegna's talent. Giovanni also painted St Sebastian because the plague which struck Mantegna's Padua, also hit Venice every 15 years or so in the 15th century. Giovanni's version appears in a large altarpiece for the church, San Giobbe, attached to the Hospital of Job in Venice.



Giovanni Bellini, *San Giobbe Altarpiece*, c 1485 (Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice)

This picture is a type called *Sacra Conversazione* (Holy Conversation) developed by Fra Angelico. Saints are no longer separated, as they would be in a triptych, but are shown as an informal group. This brings them closer to the spectator and represents them much more "as if actually present", answering the spiritual need for more immediate religious art. Giovanni's saints have a gentle humanity. Their forms are almost built out of colours without the hard-edged line of sculpture. Bellini's art is Venetian; warm and golden. Bellini's sensitivity to light adds to the gentleness of his works. Initially, Giovanni was influenced by his older, famous and abrasive brother-in-law Andrea Mantegna; statuesque forms, everything carved of stone, rendered with clear lines and with intricate draperies can be seen Giovanni's *Agony in the Garden* (1465).

Giovanni had thrown off this influence by about 1470, and for the next decade he was influenced by Flemish painting. Jan van Eyck's *Stigmatisation of Saint Francis* was owned by Anselmo Adorno who took it with him on his pilgrimage to the Holy Land in 1470-1. Anselmo stopped in Venice for a few weeks in 1471, and Bellini studied van Eyck's work. The rocks and Flemish love of detail are adopted by Bellini, but overlaid by his wonderful light and expressive power. The rapture felt by Saint Francis in receiving the stigmata is almost palpable, as is the impact they make when striking his body. The ass was a well-established symbol of life spent in solitude, penance and poverty. The heron also represents solitude and the lone rabbit in its burrow (below the saint's right wrist) is a metaphor for the hermit in his cave.



Giovanni Bellini, *St Francis in the Desert*, c 1480 (Frick Collection, New York)

Transfiguration is one of Giovanni's most beautiful, and perhaps the best work of his middle period. Colour and light effects stun us, resonating with the shock experienced by the prophets and saints who experienced the wonder. There is an absence of extravagance or ecstasy which is common in Bellini's art and distinguishes him from fervently religious artists. The sparse landscape in the late autumn afternoon light provides an austere setting for a moment of great wonder and beauty.

Christ links radiant heaven with the mundane earth and rocks of the world. Giovanni has darkened the customary yellow of the robe of Peter (centre bottom) towards brown, thus linking him with the rock beneath, upon which the first church was established. Sunlit buildings have the same shade as the rocks; Peter's blues mirror the sky. Bellini's colour patterns emerge. Flemish details remain. The same integration of the spiritual and the worldly appears in Giovanni's most famous work of his later life, the *Madonna of the Meadow*.



Giovanni Bellini, *Transfiguration*, 1478-9 (Capodimonte Gallery, Naples)



Giovanni Bellini, *Madonna of the Meadow*, c. 1505 (oil and tempera on wood transferred to canvas)

The vulture, a figure of death, perches in a bare, leafless tree, beneath which an egret, wings extended, fights a snake, an allegory of an angel and a serpent. These symbols feel part of the real world. Despite the sense of impending death, emphasised also by the pose of the Virgin and Jesus, daily life continues; fields are ploughed, animals tended and the city administered by government. Bellini shows us the link between the mysterious power of Mary and our everyday lives.

Madonna of the Meadow is softer. The landscape occupies more of the picture and is arranged in planes, distance conveyed through aerial perspective and colour gradation. Landscape is not just background but part of the whole image, as Mary is referred to as a trusty fortress, tower, walled city (a safe and happy haven of salvation), as pleasant and fertile pasture, as path and gateway to heaven, as a pure and lofty mountain and luminous sky. Durer, who stayed in Venice, said in 1506 that Giovanni was “*still the supreme master*”.

Two later works show how Bellini sustained his love of light and detail to the end of his career. The first was produced as Venice's production of glass and mirrors was undergoing a rapid development, and has been described as: “*the most subtle meditation on transparency and reflection, on seeing colour through glass and in glass.*” The vase on the window, partially filled with water, shows light in various forms. The mirror on the back wall picks up gold highlights in the head-dress.



Giovanni Bellini, *Woman with Mirror*, 1515

Giovanni contrasts materials. The precision of the decoration of the seat next to the soft red fabric (which has lost some colour because of cleaning with a harsh solvent) is mirrored by the detail of the head-dress and pearls against the softly drawn hair and distant sky.

Bellini introduced a new technique for portraits. He modelled the faces softly, so they seem a little out of focus. Further, he emphasises the warmth softness of flesh by presenting the face against a cooler background and against the meticulous detail of some article of clothing. These devices give his portraits an aloofness and make the sitters look idealised.

Giovanni was the official painter of the Venetian Patriciate and painted portraits of Doges. These men, part of a bloodline kept pure through strict segregation, ran the government of Venice, the Serene Republic. *Doge Loredan* shows how well Bellini's skill captured the Patrician ideals of imperturbable assuredness, equanimity, and suppression of individual tastes in the service of the state. The sense of eternal rule by Doges is imparted by the composition, a form usually associated with sacred paintings. Once more the face is soft and contrasted against a cool blue background and the staggering detail on the tunic.



Giovanni Bellini, *Doge Leonardo Loredan*, c 1501-4 (National Gallery, London)

The seam in his tight cap was produced simply by scraping a line into the wet soft white paint. The details of the brocade are achieved by thick broken clots of yellow and white, and the rippled surfaces of the shadowed areas of the velvet pattern by blotting with rags. These are all methods used by Netherlandish painters, above all by van Eyck, and Bellini's skill in manipulating texture in oil was to prove important for later Venetian painting.

Antonello da Messina (c 1430 - 1479)

Antonello's father was a bricklayer and stone-mason in Messina, where Antonello spent most of his life. First, Antonello was sent to Naples, the nearest city to his home which valued art. Naples then was ruled by the Dukes of Anjou followed by those of Aragon. Both families valued Flemish art and from 1438 to 1458 many northern works were brought to Naples, especially paintings by van Eyck and van der Weyden. Flemish influence on Antonello was felt in portrait painting. Antonello met Petrus Christus in Milan, and he adopted the $\frac{3}{4}$ pose of the Flemish portrait and Petrus's quiet calm poses.



Antonello da Messina, *Portrait of a Young Man*, 1465



Antonello da Messina, *Portrait of a Man*, 1476

Portraits show Antonello's characteristic style: the main lines of figures, usually monumental, are simple and remain visible on the surface in a well-ordered pattern. Light and shade are used for modelling, more so than tones: Brandi; "*Antonello so studied the slightest nuances that he makes light model the form like the strokes of a diamond point*".

The Flemish love for detail, including Netherlandish ceramics on the shelves, married to perspective and Italian trends can be seen in Antonello's *St Jerome*. Light and shadow emphasize the size and spaciousness of the interior. Landscapes appear through the windows; another Flemish motif. The tiles, often seen in Renaissance paintings to demonstrate perspective, are softened by being cut off in the centre. Although *St Jerome* is small, his rich red robe draws attention and the white of the book and sleeves are in the centre. Study and contemplation dominate the work.



Antonello da Messina, *Saint Jerome in his Study*, c 1475

There is much symbolism in this painting. St Jerome's journals show he found the city a place of the devil, where he "*suffered from the burden of the flesh*" while he discovered in the wilderness "*the loveliest city of them all, a true paradise.*" On the left is the city of Messina and on that side are a partridge, which steals eggs of other birds (and was used as a symbol of the devil trapping the young) and a cat, symbol of sexual desire, and a white towel, often an attribute of purity but here stained with sin. On the right, the landscape is of the countryside with no people or man-made objects in view, accompanied by the lion, a wild beast subdued by Christian faith, the bowl of baptismal water and the peacock, symbol of faith and of eternal life.

In 1475 Antonello visited Venice and stayed for a year or so. The fusion of detail and love of landscape with Northern Italian trends developed further during this stay. Antonello saw Piero della Francesca's figures; monumental and stately, and the effect on his work can be seen in *St Sebastian*, which was once part of a triptych. Antonello also uses Piero's alternating colour scheme. First, writ large – blue sky against architecture and paving – and then smaller background figures which appear here and there; the only symmetry on the balcony. Spots of colour emphasise depth. It is a unique work for da Messina and, like Piero's, has an abstract feel. The foreshortened man lying on the ground is a dissonant note.



Antonello da Messina, *St Sebastian*, 1478

Back to his normal repertoire, the famous *Annunciate* is beautiful in its simplicity. The viewer is compelled to focus on the pensive face, attention on reading broken by the angel which is outside the frame. Here again, Antonello's simple main lines are in evidence, and his use of light and shade enhance the intense feeling in the face. The composition uses simple shapes: the triangle and its inner heart-shape draw us to the face. Regularity is avoided by the diagonal lines of the lectern, and the hand raised in surprise gives depth.



Antonello da Messina, *Virgin Annunciate*, 1475 (damaged) (Palazzo Abatellis, Sicily)

Paintings of Madonnas were often kept in the bedroom of wealthy Italians usually behind a curtain which could be opened for morning and night-time prayers. The rise in popularity of half-length devotional paintings is attributed to Antonello's *Virgin Annunciate*, one of the most entrancing images of Mary. The Duke of Milan tried to woo da Messina as his court painter, but in 1476 Antonello preferred to return home. He died less than three years later and was buried, as he requested, in the habit of a monk.

Northern Renaissance

Albrecht Durer (1471 – 1528)

Germans refer to the years around 1500 as the “*Age of Durer*”. Albrecht Durer was one of 18 children, though only he and two others outlived his mother, Barbara. His father moved from Hungary to the rich city of Nuremberg in 1444 and qualified as a goldsmith. Albrecht began an apprenticeship in his father's shop, but when it became apparent in 1486 that he “*was more inclined to painting*”, his father placed him in Nuremberg's most highly regarded studio, that of Michael Wolgemut. Durer was picked upon there by his colleagues, but Wolgemut's workshop embraced virtually every artistic technique; woodcuts, stained glass, designs for materials as well as painting. This variety explains Durer's versatility. His apprenticeship ended in 1489 and, as was the norm, Durer travelled to continue his education: first to Colmar and the workshop of the celebrated **Martin Schongauer (1450/53 – 1491)**. Durer arrived in 1492 just after the master had died.

Making prints from metal plates first developed in Germany and Italy in the mid-15th century. Engraving entire scenes was pioneered by Martin Schongauer around 1480. His *Way to Calvary* has been called “the most influential print made in northern Europe”. It is from a very large plate (29 x 49 cm) and cutting such an engraving without mistake would have been difficult: long straight lines close together are technically challenging, and so are faint lines on a white expanse.



Martin Schongauer, *The Way to Calvary*, 1480-85 (copperplate engraving on paper) (The Met, New York)

The print has wonderful content; dramatic poses, facial types, complex clothing, with distance suggested by varying density and depths of lines. Durer was deeply impressed. In fact, Albrecht's reputation was established at home and abroad with copperplate engravings and woodcuts. His monogram "AD" served as a trademark, a seal of artistic quality, especially useful at the annual trade fair at Frankfurt.

Durer returned to Nuremberg in May 1494 to find his father had arranged a bride for him from one of the patrician families which ruled the city. Just a few weeks after the wedding Durer left, fleeing from the plague which broke out that year, and went to Venice. There he painted St Jerome.



Albrecht Durer, *St Jerome*, c 1495

The saint kneels before a crucifix rising out of a stump of a tree, and from dead wood grows the new "tree of life". Two birds appear on the bottom right; the goldfinch was a symbol for the Passion of Christ.

On the way back from Venice Durer produced a view of Arco, a few miles from the northern shore of Lake Garda. He was the first serious painter to execute high quality watercolours, and this is the loveliest. Albrecht painted many watercolours of freshness and precision. *Willow Mill* was painted from the north bank of the River Pegnitz where it runs past the Hallerwiese Park outside Albrecht's home city.



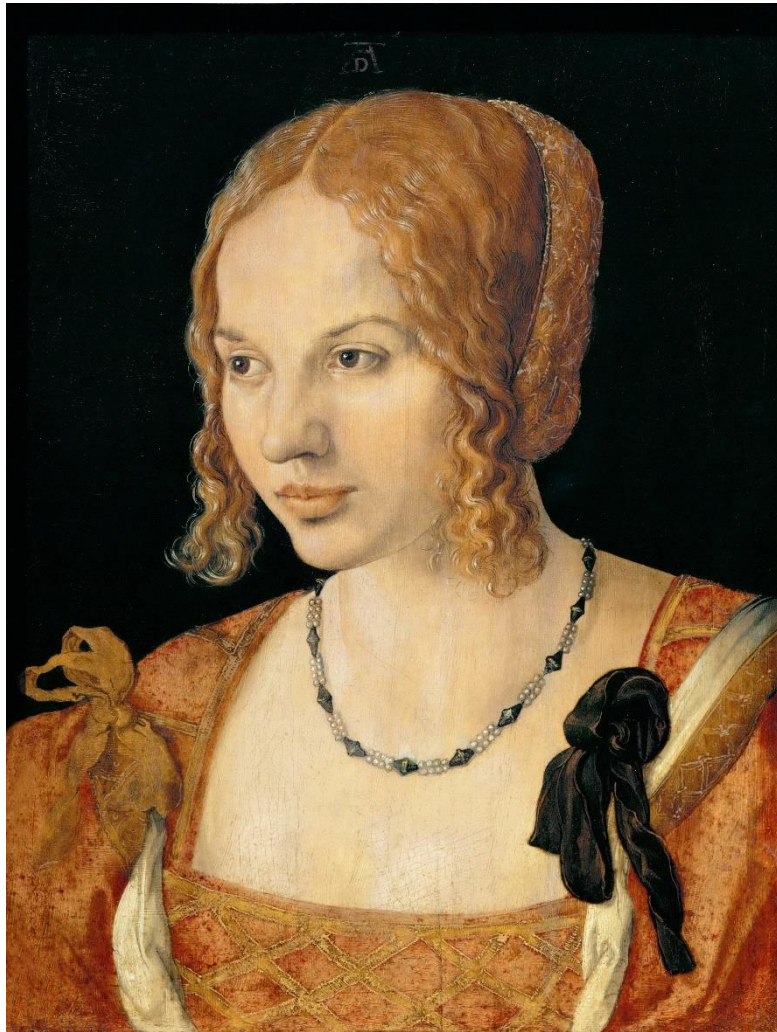
Albrecht Durer, *The Arco Valley*, 1495, (watercolour and gouache) (Louvre)



Albrecht Durer, *Willow Mill*, 1498, (watercolour and gouache)

After his return home in 1500 from his first Italian trip, Durer set up his own workshop in Nuremberg, employing his brother, Hans, among others. Engraving and the advent of printing technology made works of art affordable for ordinary citizens. Durer's prints made him famous across Europe. In those days a Durer engraving cost about half a day's wages of a city stonemason, and he benefited too from the growth of the middle class.

Another outbreak of plague in Nuremberg in 1505 prompted a second journey to Venice. Durer packed off his wife, Agnes, laden with woodcuts and engravings to travel to markets, and he himself jaunted off to Italy. In his first letters home to Nuremberg patrician Willibald Pirckheimer, Albrecht described his life in Venice, with the exception of Giovanni Bellini, negatively. Soon, however, Durer was regarded as a great artist there: "*How I shall freeze after this sun. Here I am a gentleman, at home a parasite*", he wrote to Pirckheimer a year later. At the time Venice had a population of a fewer than 175,000 souls which included 11,000 courtesans and prostitutes. Durer painted one of them, capturing the pertness desirable in a courtesan.



Albrecht Durer, *Young Venetian Woman*, 1506

Durer's greatest achievement during his second stay in Venice was a huge altarpiece commissioned by the German merchants in Venice. The Doge admired the work and made a fabulous offer to Albrecht to make sure the work stayed in Venice. Maximilian I is shown kneeling opposite the Pope, his gesture mirroring the request he submitted in reality to be crowned Holy Roman Emperor: anticipated too by the Virgin placing the rose garland.



Albrecht Durer, *The Feast of the Rose Garlands*, 1506

Durer painted himself in a golden robe by the tree on the right: self-advertisement that was met quickly with success. On his return to Nuremberg, Maximilian I engaged Albrecht as his court artist; a role which saw Durer busy with paintings, woodcuts, ornamental drawings for the Emperor's prayer-book and the design of his tomb. He was commissioned to redecorate completely the Nuremberg grand assembly hall, which hosted the imperial court, to impress Maximilian's successor Charles V. Durer's later religious works reflected his support of Luther, and those will be left to the notes on 16th century art in Europe, alongside other Reformation Art. Amid these vast duties Durer produced his master engravings.

The precision of the engraving is unsurpassed. The rider is confronted by death and decay, but grips the reins and keeps his powerful horse in check: a symbol for the restraint of instincts and passions and virtuous self-mastery. *Melancholia*, perhaps warning of dangers of brooding meditation, was regarded by Vasari as a work of art "that astounds the whole world". It has sparked much analysis by doctors, freemasons, mathematicians and astronomers, as well as art historians.



Albrecht Durer, *Knight, Death and the Devil*, 1513, copperplate engraving



Albrecht Durer, *Melancholia I*, 1514, copperplate engraving

In 1515 Maximilian granted Albrecht a lifetime annuity. When the Emperor died in 1519 and his grandson ascended to the throne, Durer was worried that the arrangement might lapse. He travelled (taking his wife with him this time) to the Netherlands where Charles V was paying his first state visit as Emperor. Margaret, the daughter of Maximilian and governor of the Netherlands used her influence on Charles V to ensure Durer's annuity would continue to be paid. In gratitude, Durer gave Margaret one of his portraits of Maximilian, only to be informed it did not please. That must have enraged him. Far worse was to come. During a trip to see a whale in the brackish waters of the Zeeland coast, Albrecht contracted a disease, probably malaria, from which he never recovered. On 6 April 1528 Albrecht died, "as withered as a bundle of straw (*Pirckheimer*).“ A lock of hair was cut from Durer's head while he was on his deathbed, and became an object of veneration for generations (now housed in the Academy in Vienna.)

Durer produced treatises on proportion, perspective and geometry. He also studied nature intensely, especially flowers and animals. His *Turf*, another wonderful watercolour, combines these obsessions: the tallest grass divides the picture into the Golden Section.



Albrecht Durer, *Large Piece of Turf*, 1503, (watercolour and gouache)

The lion we met in the first *St Jerome* was not terribly convincing, but two later studies of creatures are stunning. *Hare*, in fact, remains one of Germany's favourite paintings.



Albrecht Durer, *Wing of a European Roller*, 1512, (watercolour and gouache)



Albrecht Durer, *Young Hare*, 1502, (watercolour and gouache) (Albertina, Vienna)

Artist had begun to portray themselves and Durer was enthusiastic. Albrecht was much pre-occupied with his status, and in his first self-portrait depicted himself as a dandified gentleman. Germans regarded artists as mere craftsmen which offended Durer greatly. His aristocratic air, his costume and mountain scenery reject the view that he is a provincial artisan.



Albrecht Durer, *Self-Portrait*, 1498

His last self-portrait is considered Albrecht's best, and probably the most revealing, psychologically, depicting a regal ascendancy. The choice of composition is remarkable because a frontal pose was normally reserved for kings and Christ, whose features Durer has assimilated to some extent. The inscription set next to the artist's eyes says; "*I, Albrecht Durer of Nuremberg painted myself thus, with undying colour, at the age of twenty-eight years.*" The realism of this self-portrait apparently fooled Durer's dog into licking it.



Albrecht Durer, *Self-Portrait*, 1500 (Alte Pinakothek, Munich)

Albrecht was convinced that the artist's creative gift came from, and was part of, the creative power of God. Few would disagree. Mighty kings who commissioned works from outstanding artists *"treated them with distinction because they felt that the great masters had an equality with God"*, said Durer. Durer's remarkable faith in the value of the individual could not have existed without the Italian Renaissance which by the end of the 15th century had achieved so much more than simply the revival of Classical forms.

Durer maintained;

"The attainment of true, artistic and lovely painting is hard to come unto. It needs a long time and a hand most free and practiced. Whosoever, therefore, is not gifted in this manner, let him not undertake it; for it comes by inspiration from above. The art of painting cannot be truly judged save by such as are themselves good painters; from others it is verily hidden even as a strange tongue."

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