

Late Medieval to the Renaissance

Contents

Gothic Architecture and Art	3
Cimabue (c 1240-1302?)	8
Duccio (c 1255 – 1318/19).....	10
Giotto (1266/7 – 1337).....	13
Simone Martini (c 1285 – 1344).....	17
The Limbourg Brothers (1385 -1416).....	20
Gentile da Fabriano (c1370 – 1427).....	22
Antonio di Puccio Pisano “Pisanello” (c1395 – c1455).....	23
References	25

Gothic Architecture and Art

Before Gothic architecture came the Romanesque, thick columns and round arches. Because of the massive load-bearing walls Romanesque architecture has a characteristic heaviness and the churches are rather dark.



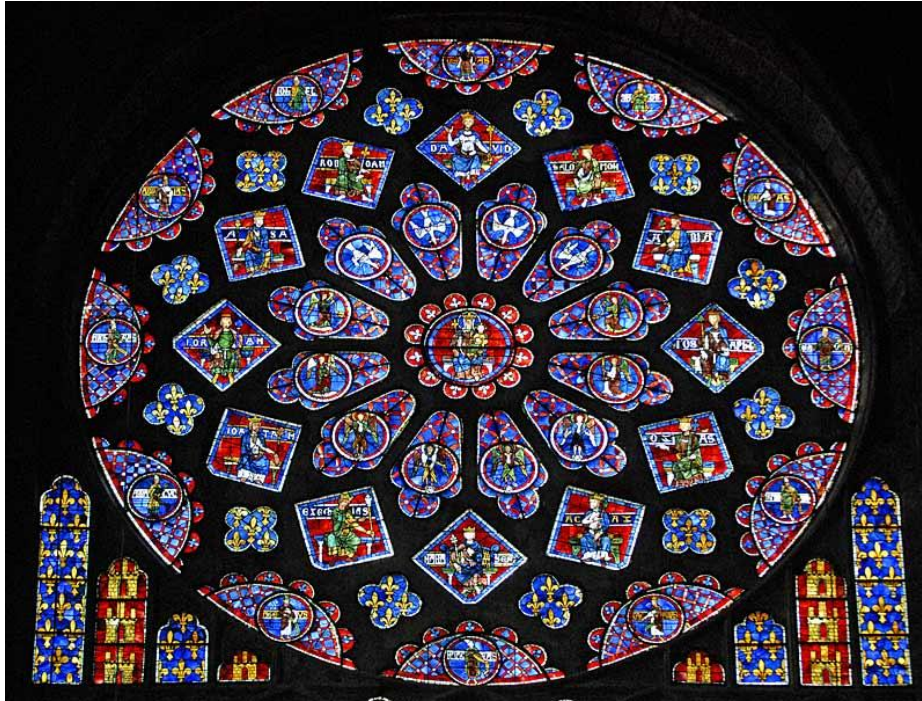
Interior of St Sernin, Toulouse, c 1080-1100.

Gothic architecture is lighter, using slender supports for walls, ribbed vaults and pointed arches.



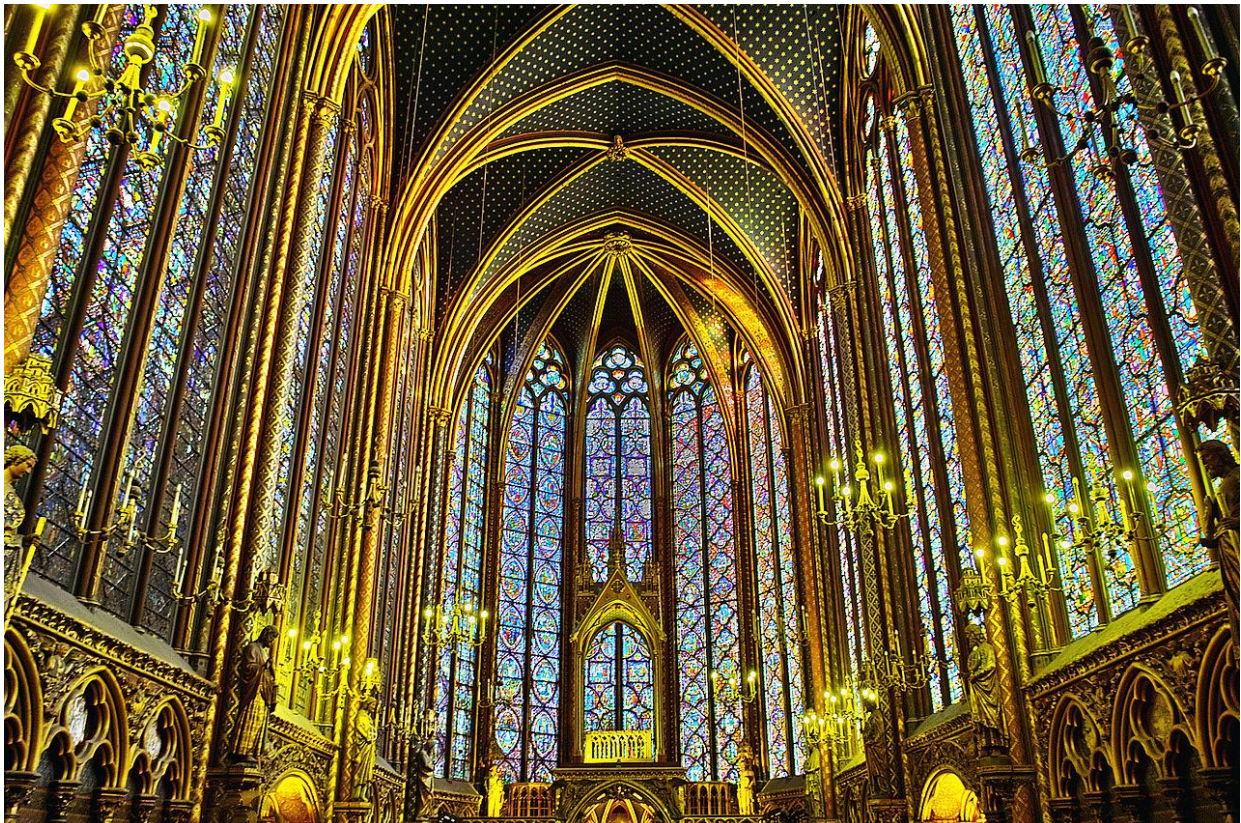
Nave of Amiens Cathedral, c 1220-36

The mass and weight of the Romanesque is replaced by long, upward finely-ruled lines, leading the eye up to heaven. The divine nature of Gothic cathedrals is enhanced by light filtering in through coloured windows. Church windows had been fitted with coloured glass since the 4th century and since the 11th century included figures. Chartres Cathedral has most of its original stained glass, conceived as a source of spiritual and physical illumination. Rose windows can be seen in Rheims and Notre-Dame.



Rose window, north transept, Chartres Cathedral, c 1230

Gradually Gothic architecture reduced the stonework separating windows to a lacy mesh of tracery, which can be seen in Chartres, Rheims, Amiens and Paris. The taller windows and vaults emphasise the thrust to heaven. With stained glass, the walls look as though they are made largely of light.



Ste-Chapelle, Paris, 1243-8

Gothic architects initially trained as masons, so carved stonework is prominent on Gothic cathedrals. Capitals of columns featuring sharply carved wreaths of naturalistic leaves (started at St Denis around 1140) set a style which spread across Europe.



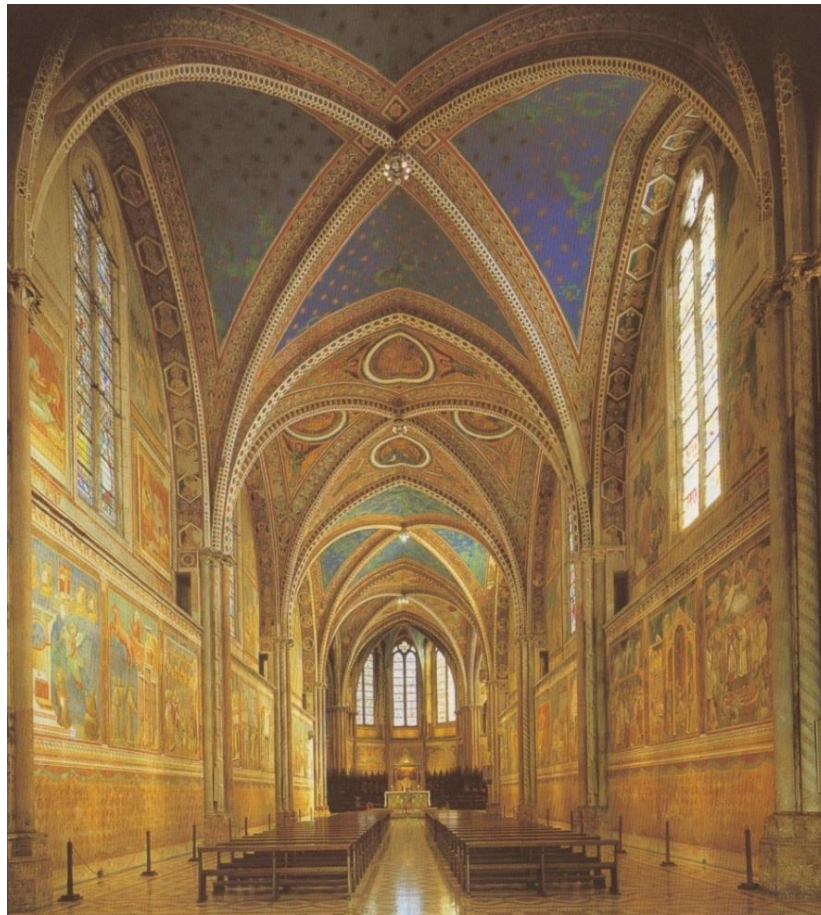
Vine leaf capital Southwell Minster, England, c 1290

Figures also appear on the outside of Gothic churches, usually in relief. At Notre-Dame they are sculpted almost in the round. They are natural and shown in expressive poses. Drapery reflects the body beneath (a feature of Gothic art) and enhances expression. The simple, calm folds of the pair on the left support the idea that they are pondering quietly something of great import; the more animated drapery and pose of the next pair suggest lively gossip.



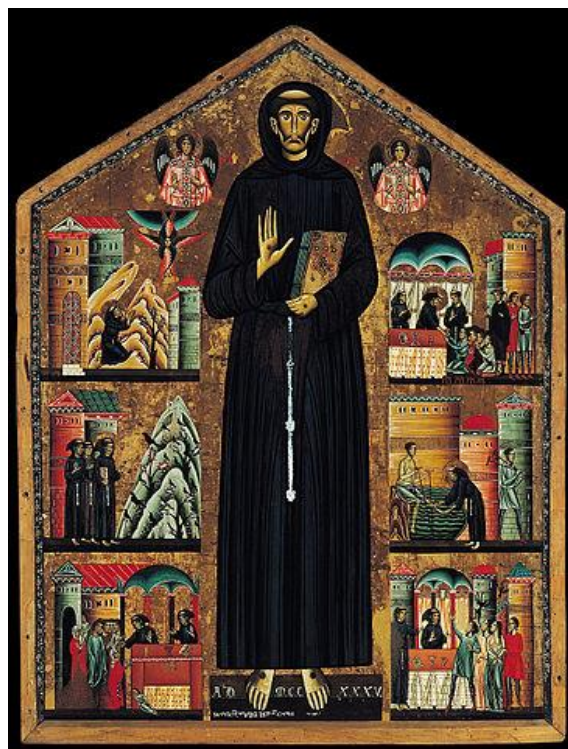
West portal, Notre-Dame, c 1225-55

Italian Gothic architecture is quite different. S Francesco at Assisi has ribbed vaults and pointed windows but soaring ecstasies are replaced by solidity and clarity, which was typical in medieval Italy in painting and sculpture as well as architecture.



Nave of S Francesco, Assisi, 1228-53

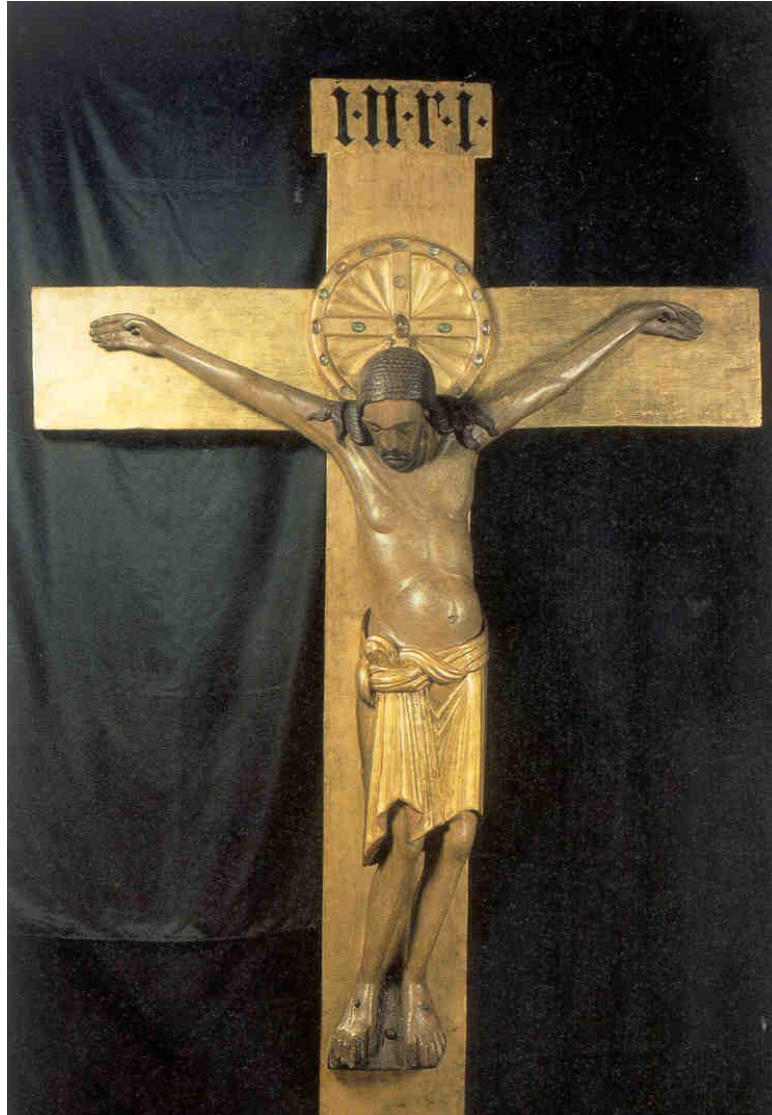
That simplicity comes from St Francis (c 1181 – 1226) and other mendicant preachers. They renounced worldly goods and spent their lives preaching to illiterate and poor people. They gave plain and vigorous sermons in common speech, emphasizing lively incidents from the lives of saints. These sermons influenced Dante, and their effect on art cannot be overestimated; they created a strong demand for vivid and easily understood imagery.



Bonaventura Berlinghieri, *St Francis*, 1235 (tempera on panel)

This painting of St Francis, only nine years after his death, shows scenes from his life (receiving the stigmata, preaching to birds, ministering to the poor and sick, and ridding the city of Arezzo of evil spirits). It is informative, not expressive. The figures and architectural backgrounds are depicted according to Byzantine conventions of the Icon: the Greek Style from which, Renaissance writers later claimed, Giotto liberated Italian art. This was a little unfair as Byzantine artists had begun to relinquish this stiff manner well before Giotto.

And almost three hundred years before St Francis there was a notable exception. Early Christians portrayed Jesus as healer, teacher or judge. The cross was a symbol of triumph over death, and the crucifixion, rarely depicted, was shown in a restrained way. Artists usually stayed with Greek ideals of physical beauty when they depicted Christ. The *Cross of Gero* was completely new.



Cross of Gero, Cologne Cathedral, 969-76

This is the earliest known example of Christ's agony which was to become a feature of western Christianity and religious art. Nevertheless, despite this early example and relaxation in Byzantine conventions, Gothic art showed scenes much more dramatically and with more emotion, but with the clarity understood by ordinary folk.

Cimabue (c 1240-1302?)

Cimabue is revered as the founder of the Italian school of painting. “By God’s providence, Giovanni Cimabue, who was destined to take the first steps in restoring the art of painting to its former stature was born in Florence in 1240”, wrote Giorgio Vasari in his famous *Lives of the Artists* in 1568. Giorgio was terribly biased towards Florentine art and artists, but his view has been accepted. As a boy Cimabue filled his school books with drawings and played truant from his grammar lessons to watch Byzantine artists at work in the nearby Gondi Chapel. Cimabue retains the feel of their art but departed in important ways by evoking depth and making figures more realistic.



Cimabue, *Santa Trinita Madonna*, c 1280-90

Few Cimabue works remain but this larger-than-life-size *Madonna*, painted for the San Francesco monastery in Pisa shows the radical changes. The composition is ordered, symmetrical in form and colour; figures have incisive contours and their faces are modelled by using soft changes in tone. Recession is indicated by the throne rising in stages, and space is shown in the arches below. This work established Cimabue.

His later *Madonna* for Santa Maria Novella (now lost) was so astonishing that Vasari reported that it was carried in procession, to the sound of trumpets and great rejoicing to the church from Cimabue's studio. The scene was painted by Frederic Leighton 600 years later.



Frederick Leighton, *Cimabue's Celebrated Madonna*, 1853-5

The painting is most notable for the inclusion of Cimabue, looking suitably august in white crowned with laurels, holding the hand of his (soon-to-be more famous) pupil Giotto. King Charles of Anjou, who saw the painting when Cimabue was working on it, is on horseback. The celebrated work and the procession, led the area around the church to be re-named *Borgo Allegra* (The Joyful District).

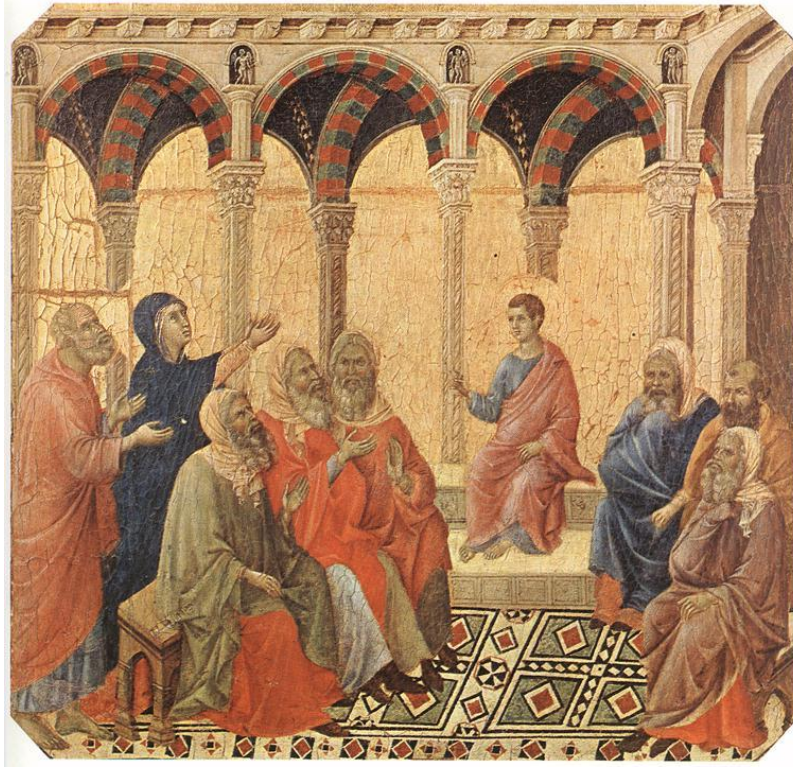
Duccio (c 1255 – 1318/19)

Duccio was the leader of the school of Siena, a city rivalling Florence in the arts in the 13th and 14th centuries. Duccio's great work for Siena Cathedral shares similarities with Cimabue's: the sense of depth and solidity of the figures, yet still influenced by Byzantine art. This altarpiece was likewise taken to the Cathedral on 6th June 1311 "with great devotions and processions ... ringing all the bells for joy and this day the shops stayed closed for devotions."



Duccio, *Virgin and Child Enthroned in Majesty* from the *Maesta* Altarpiece, 1308-11

The business of the medieval artist was to re-write the stories of the Saviour and his Mother in elaborate pictures so that even the most unlettered could read them. Duccio perfectly fulfilled these requirements. Long-familiar stories were re-told in his paintings with "a simplicity, a clearness and a completeness that, alongside the blurred images these tales usually evoked, must have seemed to most of Duccio's contemporaries like the buoyant sparkle of the morning after the groping dark" (Bernard Berenson).



Duccio, *Disputation with the Doctors*, 1308-11

Duccio shows the amazement and reproach of Mary and Joseph, the calmness of Christ and the perplexity of the elders. In *Betrayal* Christ is motionless in the centre, embraced by the treacherous Judas and beset by guards clamouring around him. On the left a hot-tempered Peter strikes with a knife and on the right disciples in a crowded flock scurry away. The men with their actions and expressions are clarity itself, despite the scene being one of great drama.



Duccio, *Betrayal of Christ* from *Maesta Altarpiece*, 1309-11 (Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Siena)

This composition is a real break with Byzantine tradition. The tufted trees provide stability and help us find Christ, who stands directly under one of them. This leads the viewer to Christ (who is not in the exact centre) a focus helped by his robe being much darker than anyone else's and lined with white. The lances and torches of the soldiers add to the sense of confinement, as well as providing sharp lines in contrast to the rounded swells of the figures. Cleverly, Duccio does not show them in boring parallel lines. Giotto copied this touch of genius, as would Velazquez more than three centuries later in his *Surrender of Breda*. Aside from drama and animation, Duccio conveys depth. The *Third Denial* shows an interior by simply removing the front wall, thus providing a good stage. Christ is calm, beneath the raging insults; Peter on the left is agitated.



Duccio, *The Third Denial*, 1308-11

Duccio was paid by the day as a wage labourer and was soon forgotten. Yet his influence is considered to be greater than Cimabue's. Duccio's figures have a better sense of volume and a much clearer expression. The ability of Duccio to convey expressions clearly is probably best shown in *Washing*: illiterate Sieneese peasants would grasp the emotions immediately.



Duccio, *The Washing of Feet*, 1308-11

Giotto (1266/7 – 1337)

Much is uncertain about Giotto, son of a peasant farmer who as a boy looked after the sheep. Vasari describes how Cimabue saw the young Giotto drawing with a sharp stone on a rock. Cimabue was so impressed he asked Giotto's father for the boy to be his apprentice. This account is disputed, but however he became Cimabue's pupil, Giotto was a success. Dante cites him in the second part of the *Divine Comedy*, written in about 1315:

*Of painters, Cimabue deemed his name
Unrivalled once; now Giotto is in fashion;
And has eclipsed his predecessor's fame.*

Giotto painted the frescoes in the Scrovegni (or Arena) Chapel in Padua, a turning point in the history of Western art and of patronage in art. Previously, major works of religious art had been commissioned by rulers, nobility and senior clerics. Enrico Scrovegni, son of a notorious money-lender, was a private citizen. He commissioned his private chapel and decorated it lavishly, seeking partly to expiate the sins of his father. Giotto's *Last Judgement* over the entrance door shows damned usurers on one side and Scrovegni presenting a model of the chapel to the Virgin on the other.



Giotto, *The Last Judgement*, c 1304-13, Scrovegni Chapel, Padua

The scenes on the walls are from the life of Christ. Giotto drew accurately from life, so his figures have sculptural solidity – a key aspect of Renaissance art which followed. Giotto omitted everything that was irrelevant, so his scenes are coherent and simple. Every figure is expressive and all are carefully posed. The compositions have a disciplined formal construction, and the wonderful colours are disposed carefully. All this gives Giotto's work a sense of gravity.



Giotto, *The Flight into Egypt*, c 1304-13, Scrovegni Chapel

Each group stands on a shallow stage. Giotto gives us a window through which scenes are brought to life; some figures are cut off by the frame and (above) Joseph is soon to depart from view.



Giotto, *Lamentation*, 1304-13, Scrovegni Chapel

Giotto was as concerned with inner states of mind as much as appearances. Each figure here is expressive, even those with their backs to us (a completely new feature in art, as faces were meant to be seen). Mary clutches her dead son and gazes into his face – a strong image of desolation, economically rendered.



Giotto, *Kiss of Judas*, 1304-13 Scrovegni Chapel

Jesus is calm, confronting the false Judas with sorrow and love. Giotto's ability to find and convey the significant is demonstrated by his depiction of the Vices around the base of the walls in the Arena Chapel. *Inconstancy* cannot settle; we feel giddy simply looking at her.



Giotto, *Inconstancy*, 1304-13 Scrovegni Chapel

Giotto is economical. Joachim is rendered with a few lines and with marvellous light and shade, yet he has a convincing presence. Giotto was even more efficient with the pope. Benedict IX, intending to commission paintings for St Peter's, sent courtiers to artists to obtain drawings so he could judge their talent. Other painters produced elaborate compositions; Giotto drew a perfect red circle.



Giotto, *The Dream of Joachim*, 1304-13 Scrovegni Chapel

Giotto is able to evoke sensations from form and pose, so we feel able to empathize with his figures and sense their movement. This is one reason why he is so revered. Duccio's expressions are excellent and the forms convincing, but the figures have little weight compared to Giotto's. The importance and purpose of form and movement was central to Renaissance art. Until now, mosaics were thought superior to wall-paintings, partly because they were more expensive; wealthy Venice was riddled with them. Giotto demonstrated the power of frescoes.



Simone Martini, *St Martin is Knighted*, (fresco), 1320-25

Simone Martini (c 1285 – 1344)

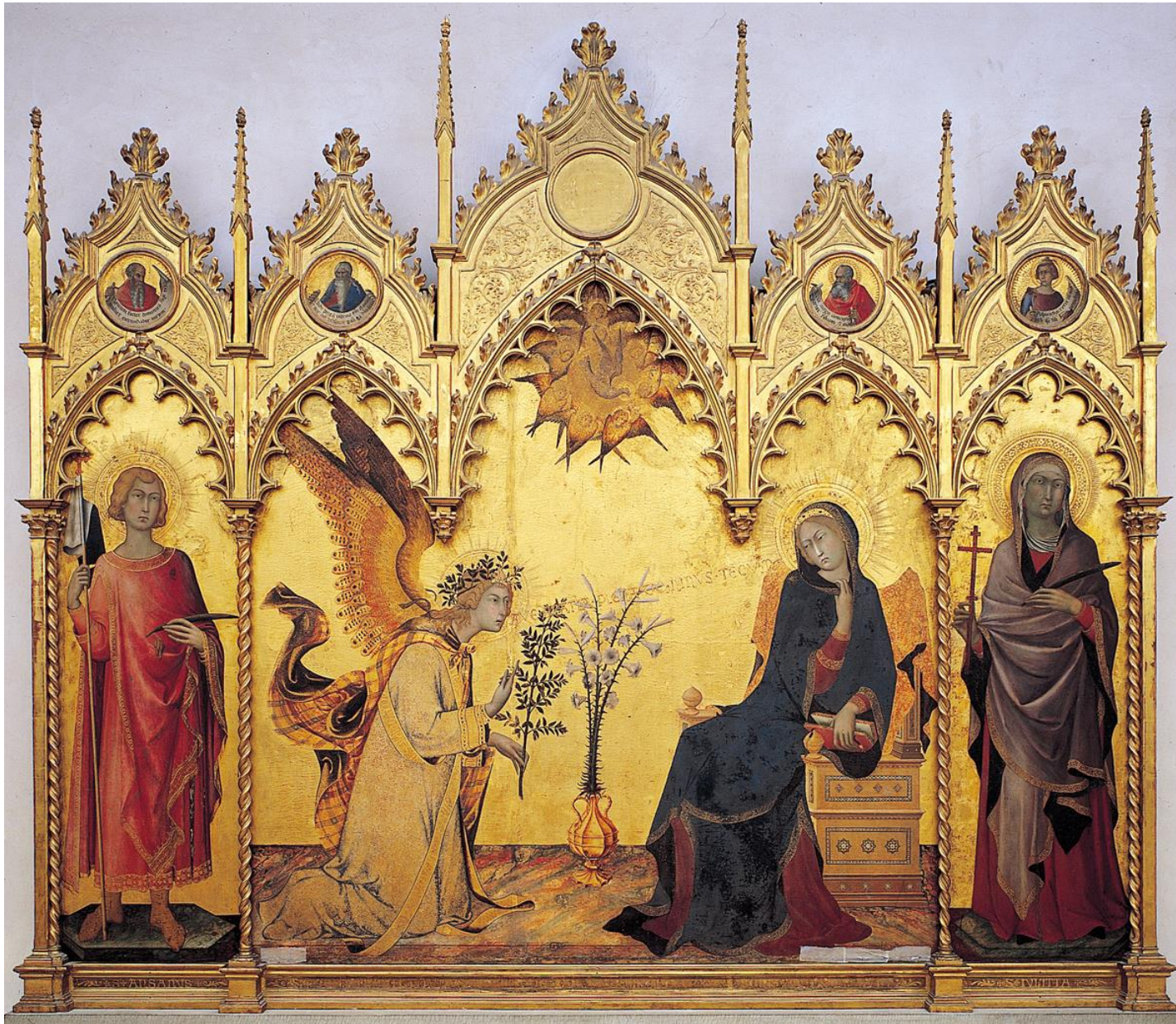
Simone Martini showed it was possible to include great detail in them too. *St Martin* has great charm but the modelling of the musician's faces and the detail of their instruments and clothes are stunning (as can be seen by zooming in). Martini was from Siena and rivalled his teacher, Duccio. He is more famous for his beautiful figures in rich altarpieces. "*Simone subordinates everything – and he was great enough to have much to subordinate – to his feeling for magnificence, beauty and grace (Berenson).*"

Martini's figures are wonderfully fluid and dazzlingly beautiful, but expressions are again a crucial element. In the *Temple* Jesus looks like a blessed child, but with his folded arms and stare is stubbornness personified – at an age when he believes he knows better than his parents, which, admittedly in his case he does. Mary is dismayed; Joseph (whose face and hair are modelled exquisitely) tells Christ to listen to his mother.



Simone Martini, *Christ Discovered in the Temple*, 1342 (Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool)

In *Annunciation* Mary shrinks from the responsibility of bearing God's Son, but sways with grace; her eyes locked on those of the piercing angel's. Simone is the most lovable of all the Italian artists before the Renaissance.



Simone Martini, *The Annunciation and Two Saints*, 1333 (Uffizi, Florence)

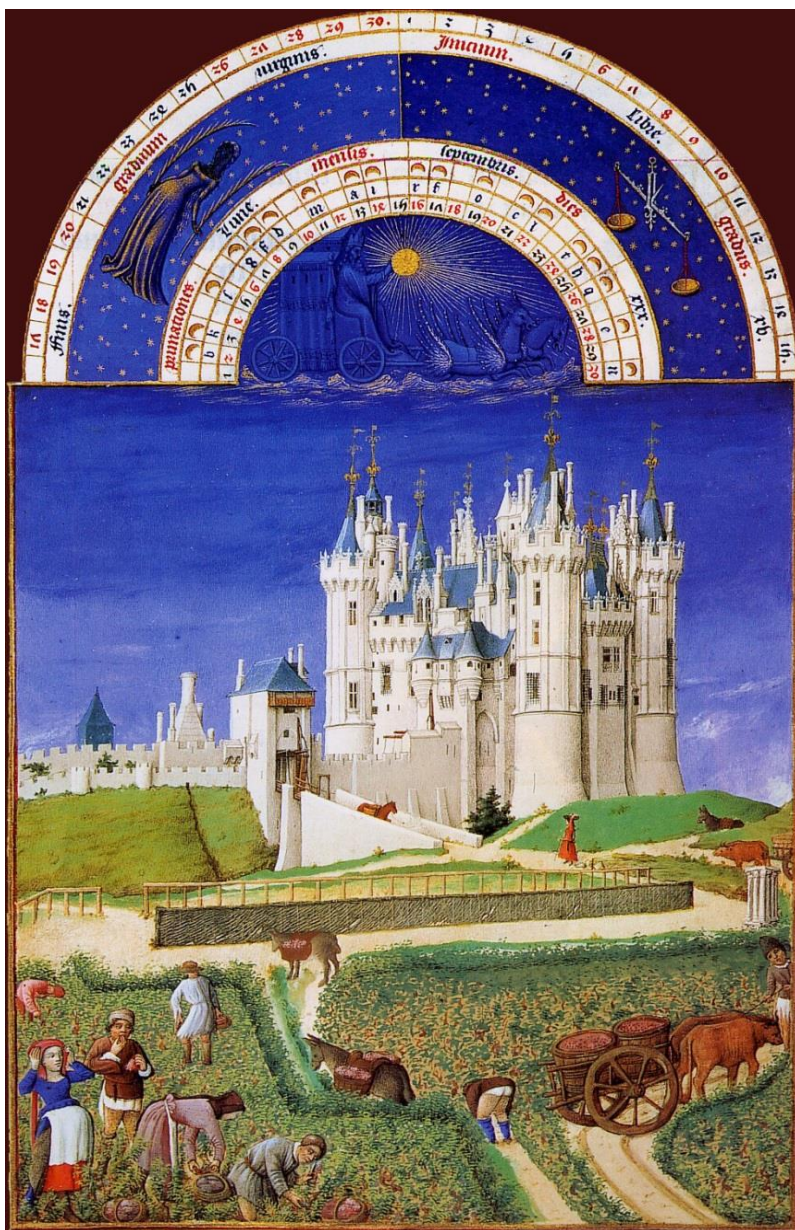
Simone's glittering art sparked the International Gothic style with elaborate surfaces, detailed naturalism in animals, flowers and costumes, and, above all, elegance. One of the finest examples is the *Wilton Diptych*. Richard II is presented to the Virgin by his three patron saints. He wears his personal badge, also worn by each angel. The banner of England and St George (and also a symbol of the resurrection) is about to be passed to Richard – his throne by divine right.



Wilton Diptych, after 1395 (National Gallery, London)

The Limbourg Brothers (1385 -1416)

Paul de Limbourg and his brothers, Hermann and Jean, were among the most accomplished practitioners of the International Gothic style. Their main achievement is the *Tres Riches Heures* (Very Rich Book of Hours) illuminated for the Duke of Berry (younger brother of Charles V). The prayer-book for the seven canonical hours begins with 12 calendar pages.



The Limbourg Brothers, *September, Tres Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*, 1413-16

Every detail is rendered with precision and, despite the unscientific perspective, the tinge of realism. The finely-detailed palace looks down (literally and socially) on the peasants beneath, who are natural but ungainly.

The Duke of Berry was a profligate spender, building 17 palaces, after which he set up a workshop for the Flemish brothers. Paul was made chamberlain and the Duke was generous: giving Paul a house in Bourges and kidnapping a girl of 8 to be Paul's wife - the Duke himself had taken a 12-year-old as his second bride when he was 48. The Limbourgs knew little of life France – English threats, internal battles between aristocrats, floods and droughts. They spent their time in the Duke's castle painting idyllic miniatures with the help of a magnifying glass.



The Limbourg Brothers, *November*, *Tres Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*, 1413-16

Landscapes feature often. So too do shadows and reflections in water, as can be seen in this detail from *October*. They were both very rare in art.



The Limbourg Brothers, *Detail from October*, *Tres Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*, 1413-16

Gentile da Fabriano (c1370 – 1427)

Gentile's mother died before he was 10; her demise prompting his father to retire to a monastery. Five years later Gentile was an orphan. He was working in Venice by 1405 and then moved to Florence, where he created a masterpiece of International Gothic art. *Adoration* has the characteristic richness of colour and textiles, meticulously recorded naturalistic detail and intricacy of composition. All manner of livestock appear, including a cheetah and monkeys.

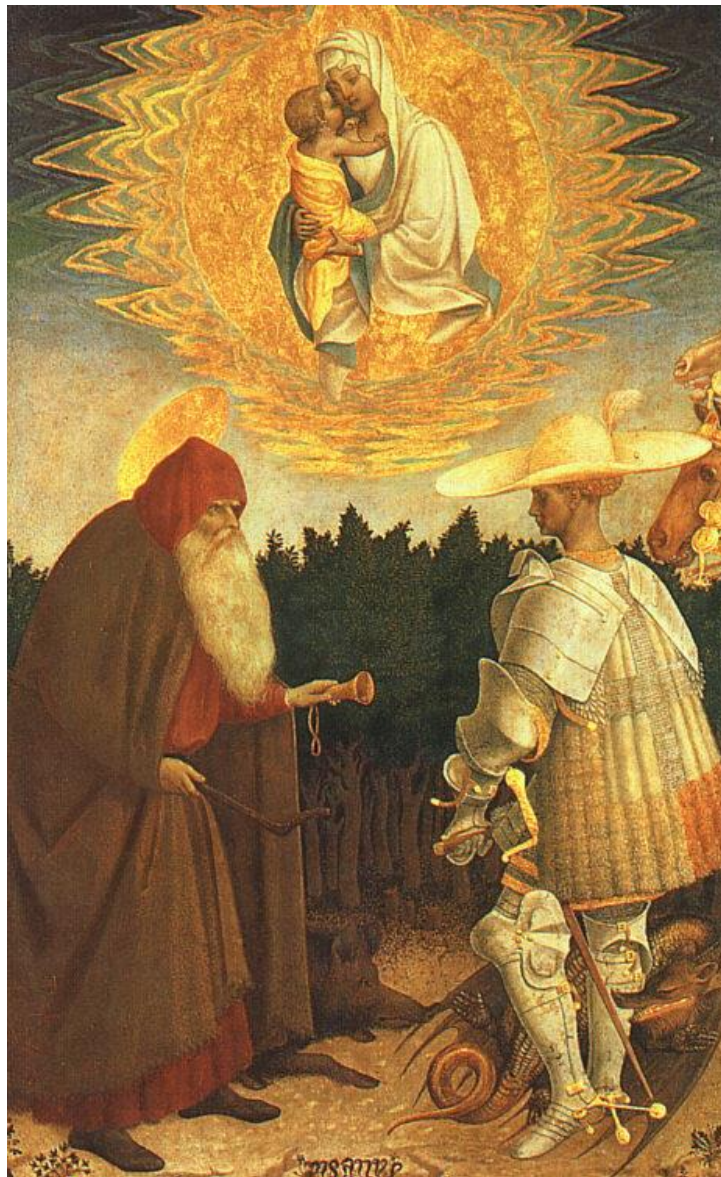


Gentile da Fabriano, *Adoration of the Magi*, 1423

All is rendered with a sharp precision. Foreshortening can also be seen (for example, the boy in blue in the middle foreground and the horse on the right). The three miniatures under the arches are as delicate as the Limbourg's scenes and show different stages of the story: wise men spotting the star; the ride to Herod's palace; the procession to Jerusalem.

Antonio di Puccio Pisano "Pisanello" (c1395 – c1455)

Antonio was born in Pisa and from 1415 to 1420 was the assistant to Gentile da Fabriano, from whom he learnt a refined and detailed style. *Saint George* is clearly an ideal figure of a knight, and the light and wonderful composition produce a noble and inspiring effect. In reality (National Gallery, London) the gold highlights on Saint George's spurs and sword, and on his horses' bridles, glisten and sparkle.



Pisanello, *The Virgin and Child with Saints George and Anthony Abbot*, 1435-41

Vision of St Hubert is painted with a naturalist's accuracy and the miniaturist's touch. Hubert (or Hubertus) was a courtier and he was happy with his lot until his wife died in childbirth. Hubert retired from court to the Ardennes and spent his time hunting. Perhaps he had lost his faith for he decided to go hunting even on Good Friday, instead of going to church. He was chasing a large stag through the forest, when the beast suddenly stopped, turned round and stared at Hubert, who was astonished to see a crucifix between the antlers. A voice told him to lead a religious life unless he wanted to go to hell, and that right quickly. Hubert distributed his riches and trained as a priest. He is the patron saint of hunters and mathematicians.



Pisanello, *The Vision of St Hubert*, 1435-41

Gothic art: combining realism, emotion and wonder in architecture and painting. An example in sculpture to finish. Far removed from the idealised images of Christ in Byzantium and abject images of suffering, is the more realistic and mystical Christ of the *Moses Fountain*.



Claus Sluter, *Head of Christ* from the *Moses Fountain*, 1395-1403, Chartreuse de Champmol, Dijon

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