How Did Artists Help Spread the Ideas of the Renaissance?

perspective: the artistic technique of showing depth and three-dimensional objects on a two-dimensional surface

I wonder ... why was most of the art in the Middle Ages based on religion?

For many people, the Renaissance is known mainly for the changes that occurred in painting, sculpture, design, architecture, and the other fine arts. Renaissance artists developed new artistic styles, techniques, and materials in line with changing worldviews. They created masterpieces that are still judged as some of the finest artwork in the history of the world.

During the Renaissance, art began to reflect the new thinking of humanism. Humanists looked to Islamic, Roman and Greek writing, art, and architecture for inspiration. They became more interested in the world around them than in the afterlife and believed that they were entitled to have beauty and joy in this earthly life. The artists changed their painting styles dramatically, portraying humanist subject matter or religious works in humanist style. In turn, their beautiful art reinforced the humanist philosophy and they were supported by wealthy humanist patrons.

A painting of the Madonna and Child (The Virgin Eleousa, from Nesselbar, Bulgaria) in the Byzantine style, which flourished from about 400 to the 1300s. When you look at these works today, the figures and backgrounds seem unnatural and two-dimensional. They did not reflect the way people really looked, but represented an iconic ideal of how artists believed the religious figures should look.

The Apparition at Arles, fresco, by Giotto, 1297–1300. Early Renaissance painting, or Gothic painting, refers to the religious paintings of the 14th and 15th centuries. This style used bright colours, but **perspective** had not yet been discovered. Religious figures were more natural, but usually had a flat gold halo encircling their heads.

During the 14th and early 15th centuries, Renaissance art continued to focus primarily on religious themes. Figures in the paintings were more lifelike than before, with realistic human proportions and facial expressions. Some of these developments came from knowledge of the human body gained from human dissection. The backgrounds in paintings also became more natural because artists began attempting to draw the world as it really looked.

During the 15th century, Renaissance artists began to paint non-religious subjects, such as classical Greek and Roman myths. Humanism emphasized the importance of the individual, so portraits of important people became more popular. Wealthy merchants and nobles paid artists to create portraits of them and their families. Since photography did not yet exist, this was the only way to record the likeness of a person.

Now that it was important for good artists to be recognized for their work, and art became a marketable commodity, artists began to sign their paintings. Sometimes painters even incorporated their own portrait into the picture as a secondary figure. Many experimented with new artistic techniques.

The exchange of ideas was a key part of the Renaissance spreading throughout Europe. The court of Urbino was an example of how people shared their ideas and learned from each other. In 1444, when Federigo de Montefelto became Duke of Urbino, he helped it develop into a city of refined culture and high learning. His library contained 1000 hand-copied manuscripts, copies of every Greek and Latin book known to be in existence at that time. Urbino became a cultural centre where scholars, artists, philosophers, musicians, and poets from all areas of Europe came to share new artistic techniques and new ideas and ways of thinking.

Renaissance Artists

In the early years of the Renaissance, the artist was seen as a craftsman or artisan. In the later period of the Renaissance, artists

- created more realistic images of the human form because they had a better understanding of the human body (Doctors and scientists were now allowed to dissect human corpses to study the body.)
- travelled more, shared ideas, developed better techniques, and became more confident in their abilities as their works were in demand
- depicted a more personal reflection of how they saw the world
- gained more freedom over their subject matter and the style of their creations
- became respected for their intellect and creative genius
- were paid more for their works
- gained status in the class system
- were treated as important contributors to society

Donatello (1386–1466) was one of the most influential artists of the early Italian Renaissance. He developed a unique technique for casting bronze statues that was used by later artists.

The biblical story of David and Goliath tells how the young Hebrew David offered to battle the giant Goliath of the attacking Philistines. He overcame Goliath by hitting him in the head with a stone and then decapitating him. The Philistines fled. The story illustrates how faith and determination can overcome huge obstacles.

Head detail of Donatello's *David*. One of his most famous works is his bronze statue of David, created about 1440, showing the biblical hero with Goliath's head at his feet. The statue is nearly life-size and striking in its detail.

Bust of Niccolo da Uzzano. Donatello was the first artist to add a sense of depth to marble sculpture. His statues became a measure of excellence for the next hundred years.

Florence Cathedral, present day. **Filippo Brunelleschi** (1377–1446) was the first to use perspective. Brunelleschi designed the octagonal dome of the Florence Cathedral, called the Duomo, completed in 1436. It was considered the most impressive engineering feat since Roman times. Brunelleschi's architecture converted mathematics into art. Brunelleschi's octagonal design is thought to have been inspired by buildings built by the Turks in Iran and central Asia.


Christ Handing the Keys to St. Peter, fresco, 1481–1482, **Pietro Perugino**, wall of the Sistine Chapel. Perugino used techniques developed by Brunelleschi to show perspective in his paintings.

Masaccio (1401–1428) was the first painter to use both linear and aerial perspective. Only four of his famous frescoes, which were the first to represent humanism in art, still exist today. These frescoes depicted scenes from the life of St. Peter. Masaccio was the first to use the early Renaissance style, which was more natural and lifelike.

Trinity: a Christian belief that God consists of three parts: the Father, the Son (Jesus), and the Holy Spirit

The Tribute Money, Tommaso Masaccio, fresco from Brancacci Chapel. Even Michelangelo studied and copied Masaccio's figures in the frescoes at the Brancacci Chapel in the church of Santa Maria Novella in Florence.
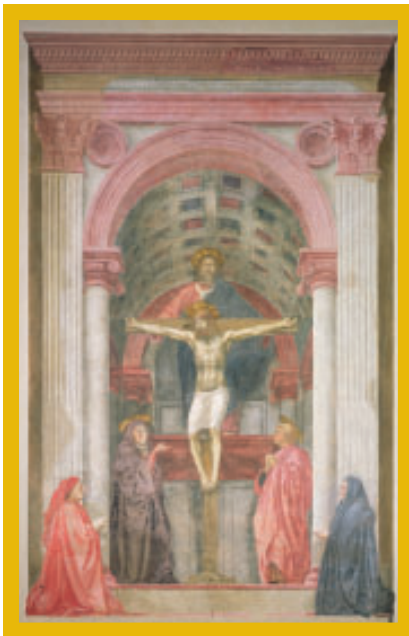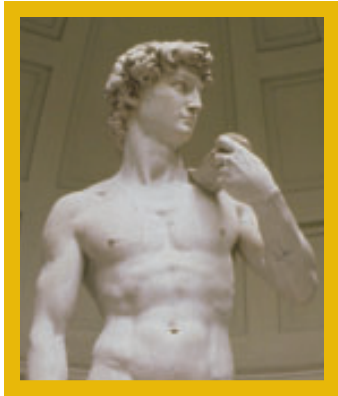

Masaccio died at the age of 27. It was rumoured that he was poisoned by another painter who was jealous of Masaccio's skill.

The Trinity, Tommaso Masaccio, fresco from Santa Maria Novella, 1427–1428. Masaccio's **Trinity** fresco of God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit shows how the use of linear perspective can create depth in a painting.

Game of Chess, Sofonisba Anguissola, 1555. **Sofonisba Anguissola** (1532–1625) was the daughter of a wealthy nobleman from Verona. She had exceptional artistic talents and her father encouraged her to produce a large number of portraits. Her portraits were praised by Michelangelo for how they showed the individuality and personality of her subjects, being good examples of Renaissance humanism. It was very rare for a woman at that time to receive such public acclaim. Even the pope owned at least one of her paintings.

Sistine Chapel ceiling frescoes. **Michelangelo Buonarroti** (1475–1564) was a brilliant Italian sculptor and painter as well as a poet and architect. He painted one of the world's great frescoes on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel (below). In 1508, he was asked by Pope Julius II to paint the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel at the Vatican in Rome. It took nearly four years to complete. Michelangelo painted the frescoes from a scaffold nearly 20 metres above the ground, his body often twisted into difficult positions to paint the curved ceiling. The Sistine Chapel is one of the world's greatest achievements in art, presenting over 400 life-size figures illustrating stories from the Bible.

David, marble, Florence, Italy. Michelangelo often insisted that he was a sculptor and not a painter. At 26, he completed one of his greatest statues — the gigantic marble *David* that stands more than four metres high, from the biblical story of David and Goliath. *David* showed the world that Renaissance art had surpassed that of the Greeks and Romans. Today, the statue of *David* is one of the most famous tourist sites of Florence.

Michelangelo apprenticed at an art studio in Urbino at an early age and later joined the Medici household in Florence. He became part of the artistic society of artists, writers, scientists, and philosophers who regularly gathered at the Medici court to share ideas.

crucifixion: putting to death by fastening to a cross

Pièta, 1498–1500. After many attempts, Michelangelo completed the *Pièta* in 1499. The sculpture shows Mary holding her dead son, Jesus Christ, after the **Crucifixion**. Michelangelo sculpted the body of Jesus, in marble, as human perfection, including every muscle and vein. The *Pièta* is one of the best representations of the Renaissance ideals of classical harmony and beauty, and the move to realistic representation of the human body. The *Pièta* is still in its original place in St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican (Rome).

Ghent Altarpiece, van Eyck. **Van Eyck** (1390–1441) a **Flemish** painter, invented oil painting. Oil allowed artists to more fully represent the real world with its vibrant colours. Van Eyck's paintings are known for their rich colours, attention to detail, and use of depth. Look at the details in this painting of the Ghent Altarpiece in St. Bavo Cathedral in Ghent, Belgium. Why have some scholars compared van Eyck's artistic eye to a microscope?

Flemish: the language and nationality of the powerful medieval principality of Flanders, now divided among Belgium, France, and the Netherlands

Scientists have recently discovered that some Renaissance artists mixed ground glass with their paint so that the colours would glint and shine.

Scientists have now examined *Mona Lisa* with lasers. They discovered that she was painted wearing a very thin veil, which was the style for new mothers in her day.

Hebrews in the Desert, illuminations by Jean Fouquet, 15th century. **Jean Fouquet** (1416–1480), a French painter, painted many illustrations for books. He painted scenes from the Bible in a new, individual style.

Mona Lisa, Leonardo da Vinci, 1503–1506. **Leonardo da Vinci** (1452–1519) is one of the best-known Renaissance painters. His *Mona Lisa* is considered by many to be the world's most famous painting and is among the finest paintings produced during the Renaissance. Da Vinci introduced many new techniques, one of which being the technique of *sfumato*, the intentional blurring of lines. He used this in the *Mona Lisa*; you can look closely, but you can't actually see the corners of her mouth. This makes her smile mysterious.

Self-portrait, Albrecht Durer, 1500.
Albrecht Durer (1471–1528) of Nuremberg, Germany, is known for his fine woodcuts. He was very proud of his appearance and painted several portraits of himself. Notice the attention to fine detail and use of shadows and light as he represented his individualism. Northern Renaissance artists became experts at using shadow and light to create different moods. These styles were borrowed by Italian artists.

Hunters in the Snow–February, Pieter Brueghel the Elder, 1565.
Pieter Brueghel (1525–1569), a Flemish painter, is considered the first Western painter to paint landscapes rather than just using them as backgrounds for figures. New techniques for painting landscapes developed by artists from northern Europe were also adopted by Italian painters as artists exchanged ideas across the continent.

REFLECT AND RESPOND

1. Select one of the sculptures or paintings from this chapter. Describe what it shows about the worldview of the time. What does it show about the artist? If it was created for a patron, what does it tell about the patron?

2. a. How did artists help spread Renaissance ideas?
   b. How did signing artistic creations show a changing worldview? How was this change representative of humanism?
   c. How might Renaissance art have reflected a new sense of identity and self-esteem among the artists and those who commissioned their works?

3. Which of the artistic works by Renaissance artists do you like best? Explain what you like about them.