

LASTING ARTISTIC INFLUENCE OF RENAISSANCE PAINTING

SEEDS OF CHANGE

The European Renaissance (c. 1400-1600) developed following a time of darkness throughout all of Europe, caused by wars, the Black Death, and religious disputes. The Renaissance, or re-birth, of the arts found its greatest flowering in Italy, and forming its roots were four interconnected developments:

- A belief in the importance of man and the secular condition (Humanism)
- A revival of Greek Classicism and its celebration of the human body
- A mastering of techniques to create the illusion of depth on a flat surface
- A greater realism in the depiction of the human face and form

Along with these societal changes were historical occurrences which influenced the renewal of the arts. The chaos within the church was a direct result of the rise of Humanism with its emphasis on the secular rather than the spiritual. There was also a renewed interest in ancient learning and art, and more and more people were questioning the role of the church in their lives.

Economic changes greatly altered most aspects of life. Because of its strategic location, Venice was the center of trade from the east and controlled most of the commerce in the eastern Mediterranean Sea. The subsequent wealth of its citizens made it perhaps the richest city of Europe. Meanwhile, Florence became an international banking center, and its banking families established branches in the major cities of Europe. Indeed, the purity standard for all European coinage was the Florentine gold coin known as the *florin* (Annenberg). The rise of capitalism and the spread of wealth meant the church was no longer the only patron of the arts, for individuals could not only purchase but also commission great art from the finest painters of the time.

RENAISSANCE ART IS BORN

The initial incubation of Renaissance art occurred in the 14th century when painters began to portray the human body more realistically and to give the suggestion of depth in the pictorial plane, as Giotto (c. 1267-1337) demonstrated in the frescoes (1300-1311) in the *Basilica di San Francesco* (Basilica of St. Francis) in Assisi, Italy. Later in the 14th-century artists were following Giotto's example using tempera, the common medium of earlier centuries. Because tempera paint dries so quickly and cannot be mixed, modeling and shading are extremely difficult. However, painters such as Agnolo Gaddi (1350-1393) used layers of tempera to approximate color mixing in order to relieve the pictorial flatness of earlier art, as in his *St. Ursula* in the Santa Barbara Museum of Art collection [Fig. 01]. Picturing faces and bodies with paint became easier in the 15th century following developments in oil paints in Venice. With the versatility and accessibility of oil paint and the discovery of canvas as a support (again, popularized in 15th-century Venice), many new art techniques were developed by the Renaissance painters to enable them to reproduce their visions more accurately and expressively.



Fig. 01

THE NEW TECHNIQUES

Linear perspective, foreshortening, *sfumato*, and *chiaroscuro* are a few of the artistic techniques developed during the Renaissance. We often take for granted these artistic techniques, forgetting that prior to the Renaissance they were unknown. This brief survey discusses some of these methods, illustrates how artists used them in paintings of the Renaissance period, and shows examples of more modern works using the same techniques, which are as relevant today

as they were some 500 years ago. Finally we look at *colorito* and *disegno*, two painting styles which during the Italian Renaissance became distinguishing characteristics of the two great artistic centers of the period, Venice and Florence.

Linear Perspective



Fig. 02

Art of the Middle Ages usually appears flat and two-dimensional. Typical paintings most often depicted saints, members of the Holy Family, and other religious figures with an abundance of gold background and little or no depth of field. The *St. Lawrence* (c. 1370-75) of Niccolò di Buonaccorso from Glasgow Museums is a particularly fine example [Fig. 02]. Much of the art of this period was designed as devotional pieces for the inspiration of the viewer, and anything the paintings lacked in accurate portrayal of the human figure could be explained by their spiritual value and intent to glorify God, exemplified by the rich gold adornment.

Leon Battista Alberti (1404-72) published *On Painting* in 1435 and offered the first explanation of what we call linear perspective. The basic concept to change a two-dimensional perspective to a three-dimensional perspective is that converging lines meet at a single vanishing point, and all shapes get smaller in all dimensions with increasing distance from the eye. Painting could now relate to the viewer's real vision and not just to a heavenly illusion. In Glasgow's collection *The Annunciation* (c. 1490-95) of Sandro Botticelli [Fig. 03] is an excellent example of fundamental linear perspective. A more contemporary use is seen in David Hockney's photographic collage *Brooklyn Bridge: #7, 1983* in the Santa Barbara Museum of Art's collection [Fig. 04].



Fig. 03



Fig. 04

Foreshortening

Just as linear perspective gave depth to a painting's background, foreshortening gave depth to an object or figure in the composition that is projecting towards the viewer. The right arm of the Child in Giovanni Bellini's *Virgin and Child* (c. 1480-85) is an example of the artist establishing perspective within a very short span, the length of an arm [Fig. 05]. Note how the arm contrasts with the awkwardness of St. Lawrence's hands and arms in the Buonaccorso panel. George Bellows similarly uses the Renaissance development in the active horse in *Steaming Streets* (1908) in the SBMA collection [Fig. 06].



Fig. 05



Fig. 06

Sfumato

Sfumato (Italian *fumo*, 'smoke') is a painting technique in which lines are intentionally blurred and given what is best described as a fuzzy appearance. It often is most notable on the contours of faces and hands. Several Renaissance masters employed *sfumato*, especially Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) and Giorgione (c. 1477-1510). Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* (1503-06) has facial features and hands which lack sharp details and evoke in the viewer that ethereal, enigmatic response which so often characterizes descriptions of the image. In Glasgow's collection examine Carlo Dolci's *Adoration of the Magi* (c. 1633-34) [Fig. 07]. While Dolci is rightly praised for the detail of his compositions, particularly his treatment of fabrics, he is also praised for his use of the contrasting style of *sfumato* to soften the faces of the figures and bring a greater sense of warmth and emotion, exemplified by the kneeling king on the right. A more recent example is SBMA's *Femme à la Chemise Blanche* [*Woman in a White Slip*] (c. 1900) by Auguste Renoir in which the painter adds softness and mystery to the woman's portrait by the use of *sfumato* [Fig. 08].



Fig. 07



Fig. 08

Chiaroscuro

Sfumato is closely related to but should not be confused with *chiaroscuro* (Italian, 'light-dark'), which refers to manipulating lights and shadows to create intense, almost black areas of a painting in contrast with other very bright

areas usually from a single light source. Caravaggio (1571-1610) and his followers are easily recognized by their use of chiaroscuro, as seen in the 17th-century painting by Giovanni Baglione *St. Catherine of Alexandria Carried to Her Tomb by Angels* (n.d.) in SBMA [Fig. 09] and Glasgow's *Virgin and Child with St Anne* (c. 1614-17) by Antiveduto Gramatica [Fig. 10]. *The Pardon* (1872) by Jules Breton in the SBMA collection is a more recent example of the chiaroscuro technique [Fig. 11].



Fig. 09



Fig. 10

COMPETING STYLES

Disegno and Colorito

Any discussion of Italian Renaissance painting must include mention of the two competing styles of the 15th century—*disegno* (Italian, 'drawing' or 'design') favored by the Florentine artists and *colorito* (Italian, 'color') by those of Venice.

Disegno was originally associated with Florentine artists Botticelli, da Vinci, and Michelangelo, who used drawing as the basis for the composition of a work. The style resulted from years of copying models and developing an eye for detail.

On the other hand, the Venetian painters, including Giorgione and Titian, composed their work by the direct application of color onto the canvas or panel without first drawing the design. *Colorito* results in emphasis on creating a beautiful picture without necessarily being a slave to exactitude. Brushwork delineates strong contours as well as broadly applied patches of warm colors, impasto, and texture of the brush stroke on the rough canvas. Indeed, *colorito* was possible only after the pairing of oil and canvas (Ilchman, 31).

Michelangelo called the use of oil paint "lazy" Venetian art (Nichols, 50). Giorgio Vasari, in his discussion of Titian's works in *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors & Architects* (1550) writes that Michelangelo said, "it was a pity that in Venice men did not learn to draw well from the beginning" (Vasari, IX.171). For his part, Titian had learned to draw but after working with Giorgione, he readily adopted his teacher's style,

to give to his pictures more softness and greater relief, with a beautiful manner; nevertheless he used to set himself before living and natural objects and counterfeit them as well as he was able with colours, and paint them broadly with tints crude or soft according as the life demanded, without doing any drawing, holding it as certain that to paint with colours only, without the study of drawing on paper, was the true and best method of working, and the true design (Vasari, IX.159).

Even though each artist believed he used the only true approach to art, we recognize the greatness of both. We appreciate the careful detail of the Florentine artists when looking at the 19th-century *Portrait of Mademoiselle*



Fig. 11



Fig. 12

Martha Hoskier (1869) by Adolphe-William Bouguereau [Fig. 12] in the SBMA collection or the exactitude of the photorealism of contemporary artist Richard Estes. At the same time we can enjoy the flair of Berthe Morisot's *Portrait of Marthe Givaudon* (1892) [Fig. 13], also in SBMA's collection, or the sweep and spontaneity of Karel Appel's brushwork.

The 16th-century debate over the merits of disegno or colorito were surely no more heated than those of the academics versus the impressionists in the 19th century. In the continuum of art history, it is these challenges which provide the impetus towards new paths of discovery. For the inventiveness of both the Venetian and the Florentine painters of the Renaissance, we better enjoy the variety and depths of art.



Fig. 13

OTHER INNOVATIONS

In addition to those discussed, the Renaissance painters contributed many other techniques and themes to the history of art. These include, but are not limited to the following:

- *Unione*
- *Cangiante*
- Depiction of the human figure
- Introduction of light into art
- Narrative, including continuous narrative
- Depiction of emotion and personality
- The rise of portraiture

Any one of these areas would be worthy of further research to demonstrate the genius of the Renaissance artists and the debt later artists owe to these creative and innovative individuals.

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