Italian Renaissance Artists from Florence, c. 1400 - 1520

Background Notes

Jo Walton — 17 January 2024

Florence Cathedral, with its dome design by Filippo Brunelleschi and built between 1420 and 1436

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The Renaissance was one of the most dynamic periods in the history of European art and culture, producing remarkable developments in painting, architecture, sculpture, music, philosophy and science. Across the many different states of Europe, artists, craftsmen and thinkers changed the way people viewed and depicted the world around them and this, in turn, changed the look and form of the world they experienced.

In this seminar we shall explore the period between 1400 and 1520, in Italy, with particular focus on the independent city state of Florence. Here, the city was ruled by a wealthy oligarchy of merchants and bankers, many of whom had made their money in the textile trade. The city was proud of its heritage, which the Florentines believed could be traced back to the world of the ancient Romans. Her more prominent citizens and the city's craft guilds (an important part of the local governance) were encouraged to use their money to help beautify the city, funding the embellishment of churches, hospitals and fine buildings. This often incorporated the latest developments in painted and sculptural decoration by leading artists – all to add lustre to Florence and to her reputation.

When thinking about 'the Renaissance' it is important to remember that this was not a sudden phenomenon. There had been regular moments of resurgence for the ideas and aesthetics of the classical world in the centuries since the fall of the Roman Empire. In the era of Charlemagne, for example, there had been much interest in the imagery and the literature of the ancient world, resulting in classically influenced figures appearing in the illuminated manuscripts of the period. By the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, that revival of interest was growing much stronger, with scholars actively seeking out ancient texts that had been preserved (or, rather, forgotten about) in repositories such as monastic libraries. These rare and fascinating documents were gradually retrieved, laboriously copied – by hand – and circulated amongst a growing band of humanists and interested collectors. At the same time, items of classical sculpture were becoming collectable. Gradually the allure of the classical past was becoming more and more mainstream.

Florence was a city where education and scholarship were considered important and where these new examples of classical thought and aesthetics were greatly appreciated. Texts by Roman authors such as Lucretius and Ovid began to change peoples' world view – fostering a renewed idea of the importance of the individual. The medieval idea of life was that its primary purpose was as a preparation for the existence of the soul after death. Classical literature opened up the possibilities of a life lived for the present, suggesting the value of enjoyment of the natural world, of beauty and of the human body. It also showed that civic duty and achievement could be important to the functioning of an effective state, as well as producing a well-rounded individual. These ideas would have a profound influence on the arts of the time, with painters and sculptors striving for realism and a conscious depiction of beauty and harmony, as well as leading to an upsurge in portraiture.

But why, we should ask, did all of this begin in Florence, rather than in the city that had been at the very heart of the greatest empire of the ancient world?

Rome may have had an abundance of classical remains, but by the early 1400s it had become ruinously derelict and run down, with the leading families of the city in a state of virtual civil war. For much of the fourteenth century the Papacy and the Curia (the administrative government of the Catholic Church) had been absent in Avignon, in the south of France. As well as being the leader of the church, the Pope was the temporal overlord of the Papal States, of which Rome was the capital. Without the Papal court the city was bereft of its *raison d'être* – no visitors on church business, no ambassadors and diplomats, no pilgrims visiting the city basilicas. Poor, violent and beset by malaria, Rome was a city without purpose, its citizens trying to scrape a living amidst the fallen columns of a distant civilisation, re-using the fallen stones without much interest in what that long-gone heritage could offer them.

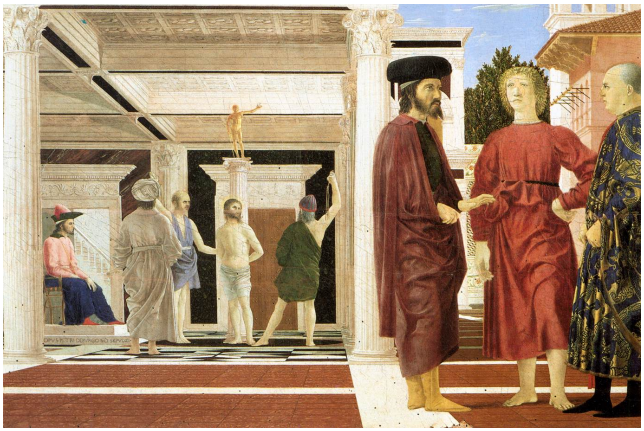
Giorgio Vasari, writing his '*Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects'* in the mid-sixteenth century, stated that Filippo Brunelleschi had been one of the first Florentine artists to thoroughly explore the ancient remains of Rome. Having lost out on the prestigious commission to make a set of bronze doors for the Baptistery in Florence in 1401, he decamped to Rome with his friend, the young sculptor, Donatello. There they caused great amusement by studying, measuring and drawing all the examples they could find of classical structures and sculptures. The locals thought they were mad, or treasure-seekers looking for gold, as – shabbily dressed and oblivious of comment – they dug bits of old stone out of the wreckage of the old Roman forum.

Donatello, *The Feast of Herod,* 1425 – 27,
Panel from the Baptistery, Siena Cathedral

Brunelleschi's discoveries, however, would lead to a revolution in the practice of architecture. On his return to Florence he began to use the language of classical structures to create an entirely new form of harmonious and rational architecture, based on underlying mathematical ratios and a profound understanding of geometry. He also used his mathematical skills to codify the science of linear perspective, which would revolutionise the way in which painters could instil their images with a sense of depth and three-dimensionality.

Paolo Uccello, *The Hunt in the Forest,* 1460s
(Ashmolean Museum, Oxford)

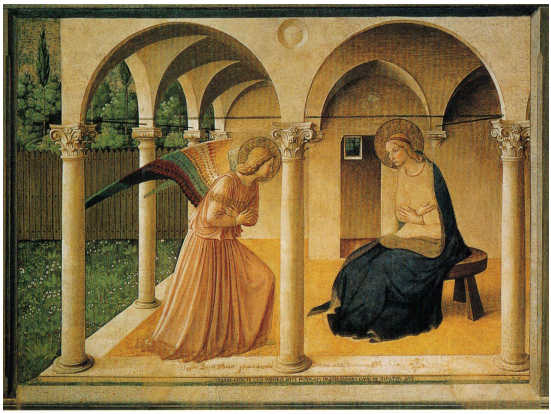
Using linear perspective allowed an intense focus on depicting reality and radically changed the way paintings looked. Artists such as Masaccio, Fra Angelico and Paolo Uccello explored the depiction of figures in believable space; Botticelli created timeless images of the goddesses of the ancient world and Piero della Francesca set religious figures in beautiful landscapes.



Piero della Francesca, *The Flagellation*, c. 1455
(Galleria Nazionale delle Marche, Urbino)

Patrons also realised the possibilities of using art for prestige and to enhance power, as well as for the joys of possession. The Medici family, the leading citizens of Florence in the fifteenth century, were at the forefront of this classical revival. Led by Cosimo de' Medici, a brilliant diplomat and businessman who was passionate about the classical world, they readily commissioned works from major artists for their own delight and for the furtherance of the family grip on power. Cosimo himself became a loyal friend to many artists, treating them with respect, courtesy and kindness and filling the city with examples of his largesse.

Cosimo commissioned Brunelleschi to rebuild the church nearest to his house. In the resulting basilica of San Lorenzo we can see the delicacy of Brunelleschi's division of space, each element in harmonious relation with the next. Cosimo also used the architect Michelozzo to rebuild the monastery of San Marco, a Dominican foundation a little to the north of the city centre. Here a member of the religious community, the painter Fra Angelico, produced small frescoes for the various monastic cells as well as glorious altarpieces for the monastery church and elsewhere. Cosimo may have felt that such philanthropy was good for the profile of the Medici family, but his obvious love and appreciation of the works of contemporary artists shines through in all his artistic patronage



Fra Angelico, *The Annunciation* c. 1440 – 1445
(Monastery of San Marco, Florence)

At the beginning of this period the idea of the painter or sculptor was primarily that of a craftsman, working on a wide range of different projects, alongside other craftsmen. By the early sixteenth century some highly successful practitioners were becoming known throughout Europe, their fame giving enormous prestige to those for whom they worked. The most obvious example of this is Leonardo da Vinci, with his extraordinary ability to encompass science, engineering, mapmaking, design, optics and anatomy alongside painting. At his death in 1519 he was living as a guest of King Francis I of France, honoured around Europe. But Leonardo was not alone.

Figures such as Michelangelo – another native of Florence – and the younger painter Raphael were rising to prominence, developing the idea of the individual artist as a "star" performer on the world's artistic stage. With careers encompassing multiple artistic strands, these practitioners were raising the bar – working at the highest level, for prelates and rulers and pushing the boundaries of what was expected by the artists who would come after them.

Raphael, *La Donna Velata,* 1512-15 (Pitti Palace, Florence)

Books – you might find some of these interesting as background reading

Michael Baxandall; *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy* (Oxford University Press, 1988)

Stephen J. Campbell and Michael W. Cole; *A New History of Italian Renaissance Art* (Thames & Hudson, 2nd ed. 2018)

Stephen Greenblatt; *The Swerve: How the Renaissance Began* (Bodley Head/Vintage, 2011)

Mary Hollingsworth, *Princes of the Renaissance* (London, Head of Zeus Books, 2021)

Evelyn Welch; *Art & Society in Italy 1350 – 1500* (Oxford History of Art: Oxford University Press, 1997)

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