

History and Context

The renaissance was a period of development in European Countries from the 15th to 17th centuries, where the artistic styles shifted towards the classical work of the Greeks and Romans. With this came a shift towards humanism and the idea that a person's actions can be the main decision of their life. The renaissance also led to more people getting educated about the world around them, mostly focusing on math and science as the Greek and Roman philosophers would have. Contemporary artist Giorgio Vasari, was the first person to use the word "renaissance" to describe this art movement in his book about art history. Even though the renaissance was about humanism, Christianity and God still play a large role in the paintings of the period. Many paintings at this time, especially in Italy, would depict saints and other beings that acted as intermediaries between people and God.

The Early Renaissance is well known for its depictions of ideal forms of humans in the nude. This was considered the "embodiment of spiritual and intellectual perfection" to the artists of the renaissance, and was very different from the art of the Middle Ages where human bodies were covered except when showing morally corrupt individuals. At this time, storytelling through relief panels gained popularity. This style of art gained popularity because it allowed for the viewer to focus on the humanity and growth of the character(s) in the painting. The detail used in these depictions allowed for people to connect with the characters in the art on a personal level and truly understand what they were going through. During the renaissance, illusions of depth and linear perspective were explored for the first time by the artist Brunelleschi. He created paintings that used scale and vanishing points to add depth and perspective. This is one

of the first times that this technique was used, and it changed the way that art was created. Using perspective allows the story to be told without the use of separate panels, creating a continuous narrative.

The most notable artists of the Renaissance were Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo Buonarroti, and Raphael. These artists used the principles of perspective and illusionism in their works. These principles created works of art that look very realistic. The walls and ceilings of the Sistine Chapel showcase the realism that these principles provide. Michelangelo was the artist behind these fresco paintings. Although he preferred sculpting over painting, he was a renowned artist. As a testament to his sculpting desires, he would paint many figures in the nude with detailed, muscular physiques. Although these paintings inspired controversy during the renaissance, they are still viewed and adored by millions around the world.

The piece *The School of Athens* by Raphael not only uses common techniques of renaissance like perspective and illusionism, but also displays the ideals of the renaissance. Raphael does that by portraying some of the greatest philosophers of the Ancient world in bodies modeled off of other artists. This provides a painting with realistic people, and shows the interest of the renaissance thinkers in the ideas and philosophies of the Greek and Roman philosophers. The renewed interest in classical thinking and art styles is a main facet of the renaissance, and *The School of Athens* does a wonderful job of portraying that relationship.

Renaissance pieces in Northern Europe portrayed messages through symbolism instead of idealism, and would often be of small intimate settings as opposed to large grandiose ones. The

use of oil paint instead of tempera or fresco allowed the artists to add more detail to their painting, which allowed for more symbolism as well. An example of a painting with a lot of symbolic meaning would be *The Arnolfini Portrait* by Jan van Eyck. To understand the meaning of the painting, one has to look at each individual item and consider its significance at the time. Items such as the fruit in the window sill and the elaborate bed symbolize a hope for fertility and child bearing. The chandelier and types of fruit symbolize the wealth of the people that appear in the painting.

Like renaissance works in Italy, renaissance works in Northern Europe had large aspects of religion, specifically Christianity. Many of the details in the piece *The Moneylender and his Wife* by Quentin Metsys symbolize religious figures and the temptations that affect all people. The distraction of the woman from her religious book shows how easily one can be tempted away from religion to material objects. Portraying both religious symbols, especially ones of Mary, and symbols of greed show the choice that these people had to make. The focus on the material instead of the spiritual shows what choice that couple had made.

As the renaissance came to an end, the style of art shifted from illusionism to mannerism. Instead of trying to create art that tricks the viewer into thinking that it could be real, mannerism depicts people with proportions that are not quite right. They look elongated and fake. This use of distortion amplifies the themes and subjects of the paintings. It also serves as a representation for the disorder and chaos that was occurring at the time, especially in the Catholic Church. The paintings of the late renaissance also focus on individualism, and the unique traits of every subject in the painting instead of focusing on cohesion between all of the pieces. Even as the

renaissance comes to an end, there is still a focus on Greek and Roman art, especially the use of domes and arches in architecture.

In the painting *The Ambassadors* by Hans Holbein the Younger, the artist uses color to symbolize the wealth of the people in the painting. The vivid green of the backdrop would have required a lot of time and dye. The royal purples and blues of the clothing of the men would have taken rare and expensive minerals to dye. The amount of fabric used and the apparent quality of it also adds to the idea that these men are very wealthy. The red of the shirt, tablecloth, and flooring contribute to the feeling of power that comes from the men. The low saturation of the colors in the painting adds to the cohesion of the piece and helps all the items in the painting flow together.

The use of lines and shapes in the painting contribute to the feeling of power that is exuded by the subjects of the painting. The repetition of the patterns in the background and on the textile on the table contribute to the feeling of control in the painting. If the men are able to control their surroundings to that extent, they likely have control of other aspects of their lives. The vertical lines of the background continue to add to this feeling of authority. The vast amount of detail in the various fabric pieces symbolizes the wealth of the subjects of the painting, as these items would be costly in both time and money. The geometric shapes of the patterns adds to the formality of the piece and makes the subjects seem very important.

The focal point of *The Ambassadors* is the shelf in the middle. This shelf is adorned with many different objects, each serving as a symbol. Since these objects portray the most symbolism in the piece, it makes sense that they are placed in the center of the work of art and

are the focal point. The globes on the shelf symbolize that the men are well traveled, which makes sense as they are ambassadors. The various dials in the piece also symbolize the worldliness of the men, and serve as a reference to the Greek and Romans who used these types of dials to verify their different theories. The skull in the bottom part of the painting serves as a symbol of mortality. The warped shape of the skull is a feature that shows the time period of the piece. During the renaissance it was popular to include pieces in the art that could only be seen from a particular angle, this skull is one of those pieces.

In *The Ambassadors* the artist uses value to make the figures look realistic. The detailed highlights and shadows make it look like the ambassadors are real. This use of value to make a piece look more realistic is a practice that gained popularity during the renaissance. The artist also uses implied depth to make this painting look realistic. The overlapping of the objects on the shelf and the overlapping of the men over the shelf add depth to this painting, and make a clear foreground and background.

The scale of *The Ambassadors* is a very large scale. The painting is almost life size, and measures in at 207 by 209.5 centimeters. This scale communicates the importance of the subjects, not only because they are depicted at this large scale, but also because they were wealthy enough to have this large scale painting created. The proportions of the painting tell the viewer a little bit about the people in it. The man on the left is slightly larger than the man on the right, which shows his importance. The proportions of the various artifacts and items on the shelf show which of them are the most important.

