

Expansion in Humanist Thought

The humanist movement, begun during the Proto-Renaissance under the teachings of men like Petrarch, continued to grow, as leading individuals (like Lorenzo Medici) grew up under its influence. The term *renaissance* literally means “rebirth” – the rebirth of ancient ideas and culture. Not only were classical works studied and copied, but so were ancient texts, as leading members of society sought to “recreate” a period of prosperity and discovery. This rebirth extended not just to the arts and literature but also to science, commerce, music and, some would say, philosophy.

Artistically, more emphasis was placed on replicating classical Greek and Roman works, which led to the reintroduction of the equestrian statue. Advanced perspective, complex scenes, contrapposto poses and paintings with a sculptural feel began to emerge simultaneously. For example, Pietro Perugino’s *Delivery of the Keys* painted in c. 1482 for the Sistine Chapel was meant to depict St. Peter receiving “the keys to heaven” from Christ. Yet the figures are not shown in a 1st-century Holy Land setting, but rather in a classical Roman forum with two triumphal arches (based on the Arch of Constantine) flanking a Roman-style temple with columned porticoes. The complex scene includes a number of figures standing

in contrapposto pose and the lines drawn on the square’s ground are all based on a single vanishing point using linear perspective.

Although these artistic advances were good, the accuracy of religious material suffered, as more emphasis was placed on humanist ideas than on the religious events. Essentially, humanists were teaching that man was inherently good. This view was in direct opposition to the biblical view which paints man as inherently sinful and in need of a Savior. Humanist views further presented man questioning, reasoning and acting apart from God and His Word, ultimately placing man as the center of importance. This view profoundly altered the course of history, as lines between truth and falsehood were blurred in the quest for “understanding.” This viewpoint is readily seen in Montefeltro’s inclusion of a Christian and pagan chapel side-by-side in his Ducale Palace at Urbino, considered one of the largest and greatest humanist courts in Italy at the time (page 234).

Religious Errors

During the Early Italian Renaissance, some (though not all) artists began fashioning a more “modern” take on religious subject matter, to the point that a biblically illiterate person likely would not be able to tell the



Delivery of the Keys fresco in the Sistine Chapel by Pietro Perugino from c. 1482.

difference between a religious and secular piece. Lippi’s *Madonna and Child with Two Angels*, for instance, took on this approach (page 232). Botticelli’s *Adoration of the Magi* even went so far as to give more care to the pompous contemporary figures “playing” biblical characters than it did to the respectable religious subject matter portrayed in the work (page 239).

At a time when detail (within a piece) was becoming more and more important, it is ironic that so many contextual errors were made regarding religious works. For instance, Botticelli’s *Virgin and Child with Two Angels and the Young St. John the Baptist* from c. 1465-1470 shows Mary and the angels wearing clothing typical of the 1400s rather than authentic 1st-century garb. But, it is the inclusion of John the Baptist in this scene that most clashes with Scripture. For, the “annunciation scene” in Luke 1:36-37 has the angel Gabriel saying to Mary: “And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.” Later a pregnant Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth who has this reaction in verse 41: “And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb...”

By scriptural accounts then, we find that both women were pregnant at the same time with children that were only six months apart in age. In this painting, however, John the Baptist (shown on the right and symbolized by the long, thin staff) is depicted nearly a decade older than the Christ child. This “artistic license” was not limited to this painting but can be found in others that also portray John the Baptist as quite a bit older than Jesus. There is no definitive answer as to why and how errors like this occurred. It may simply be that the artists and/or patrons “didn’t care.” Perhaps they viewed this arrangement as creating a more “balanced” composition – one without Mary having to tend two babies or having to include John’s mother Elizabeth to hold one of them.

Artistic Advances

Today, Early Italian Renaissance subject matter is often associated with what is considered to be some of the arts’ most fundamental advances – namely the use of linear perspective and a wide range of media. While the artists of the previous Proto-Renaissance period were “playing around” with the idea of perspective, it was Early Italian Renaissance artists, such as Masaccio and Brunelleschi, who fully explored and recorded the precise mathematical ratios, lines and points that make up linear perspective. Further, it was Early Renaissance artists such as Donatello who helped refine the way the body is best portrayed anatomically and Giovanni Bellini who first



The Virgin and Child with Two Angels and the Young St. John the Baptist by Sandro Botticelli from c. 1470. Tempera on panel painting now housed in the Gallery of the Academy of Florence.

began experimenting with oil paints in Italy.

Artists were no longer afraid to experiment and were continually pushing the boundaries of what could be accomplished. One example is Brunelleschi’s complex “double dome” design for the massive Florence Duomo (page 224). Another excellent example of innovative artwork is the two studiolos created for Federico da Montefeltro (page 236), the walls of which were lined with tiny pieces of wood veneer adhered together to create a trompe-l’oeil effect that included what appeared to be a room full of cabinets sporting all manner of objects.

Today, when most people think of the Renaissance, they think of Michelangelo, Raphael or Leonardo da Vinci; yet, these artists would not have known what they later did, had it not been for the experiments and advancements of artists in the Early Italian Renaissance. Certainly, this was a time of great change. Artistically, man was once again observing the art originally created by God and attempting to reproduce it carefully in their quest for a naturalistic style. It is unfortunate that the philosophical movement of the day pushed people further away from God rather than drawing them nearer to Him, even as they studied and sought to recreate the beauty and order that He first created.