8.6: Italy in the 16th century- High Renaissance and Mannerism (I)

Italy: 16th century

One of the most tumultuous periods in Western culture—primarily due to the Protestant Reformation.

1500 - 1600 (The High Renaissance and Mannerism)

A beginner's guide

Toward the High Renaissance, an introduction

by DR. BETH HARRIS and DR. STEVEN ZUCKER
When you think of the Renaissance, the names that come to mind are probably the artists of this period (the High Renaissance): Leonardo and Michelangelo, for instance. And when you think of the greatest work of art in the western world, Michelangelo’s Sistine Ceiling might come to mind. This is a period of big, ambitious projects.

How is the High Renaissance different from the Early Renaissance?

Fra Filippo Lippi, *Madonna and Child with Two Angels*, ca. 1455 – 1466, tempera on wood (Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence)

As the Humanism of the Early Renaissance develops, a problem arises. Have a look at Fra Filippo Lippi’s *Madonna and Child with Angels*. We see a Madonna and Christ Child that have become so real—the figures appear so human—that in some ways we can hardly tell that these are divine figures (except perhaps for the faint outline of a halo, and Mary’s sorrowful expression and hands clasped in prayer). On the other hand, in the Middle Ages, the need to create transcendent spiritual figures, meant a move toward abstraction—toward flatness and elongation.

In the Early Renaissance then, a tension arises. To create spiritual figures, your image can’t look very real, and if you want your image to appear real, then you sacrifice some spirituality. In the late 15th century though, Leonardo da Vinci
creates figures who are physical and real (just as real as Lippi’s or Masaccio’s figures) and yet they have an undeniable and intense spirituality. We could say that Leonardo unites the real and spiritual, or soul and substance.

Figure \(\PageIndex{2}\): Andrea del Verrocchio (with Leonardo), 
*Baptism of Christ*, 1470-75, oil and tempera on panel, 70 3/4 x 59 3/4" / 180 x 152 cm (Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence)

The best way to see this is in this painting by Verrocchio—an important Early Renaissance artist who Leonardo was apprenticed to when he was young. Verrocchio asked Leonardo to paint one of the angels in his painting of the *Baptism of Christ* (above).
Can you tell which angel is Leonardo’s? One angel should look more like a boy—that’s the Early Renaissance angel (the one painted by Verrocchio) and the other angel should look like truly divine, sent by God from heaven (that’s Leonardo’s angel).

The angel on the left is Leonardo’s.

Leonardo’s angel is ideally beautiful and moves in a graceful and complex way, twisting her upper body to the left but raising her head up and to the right. Figures that move elegantly and that are ideally beautiful are typical of the High Renaissance.

Additional resources:

Explore Leonardo from The National Gallery
Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:
Mannerism, an introduction

by Dr. Heather Graham and Dr. Lauren Kilroy-Ewbank

What is mannerism, and why did it develop in the 16th century?
Parasitic. Original. Derogatory. Refined. Hyper-decorative. Courtly. Anti-classical. Classicizing. All of these words (and many more!) have been used to describe mannerist art, which begins in the 16th century. But what is it, and how could it possibly prompt so many contradictory descriptors?

What is mannerism?

Parmigianino’s *Madonna of the Long Neck* is a famous example of mannerist art. It was painted for the funerary chapel of an Italian noblewoman. In the center, the Virgin’s lower body seems to swell, her impossibly long legs swathed in billowing fabric that then clings sensuously to her rapidly tapering torso, revealing her navel and a protruding nipple. Her head, seeming too small for her body, is precariously balanced upon an elongated neck rising from narrow, sloping shoulders. Christ’s spindly, bare body stretches across her lap. Pressed closely to her right are sensuous yet bizarrely proportioned angels, compressed into the foreground. One angelic figure, showing a long bare leg, holds an elegant antique vase with the tips of his impossibly long fingers. On the right side, a diminutive figure in the lower corner mysteriously holds up a scroll, while the background recedes dramatically into a deep, unfinished space. The architectural space is designed to appear illogical (though it can be reconciled) and the within it figures are mis-proportioned, yet the overall impression is one of elegance and carefully contrived artifice. This effect is enhanced by the use of rich jewel tones and the absence of visible brush marks.
Parmigianino takes us to an otherworldly realm in which the laws of proportion, naturalism, and mathematics do not apply. It is a far cry from the rational classicism of earlier works like Raphael's *Madonna of the Meadow* (from what is traditionally called the "high renaissance"). Here, the Virgin and Christ child, accompanied by the infant John the Baptist, are rendered in classical proportions and occupy an idealized though believable space. The Virgin’s body is demurely clothed and the children’s plump forms suggest playful vitality. Nowhere do we find the sensuous ambiguity or the irrational geometry of Parmigianino’s creation. Something new is happening in the mannerist image.
Towards a definition of mannerism

The term “mannerism” is not easily defined. It has been used to designate art that is overtly artificial, often ambiguous, and conspicuously sophisticated. However, these are by no means the only stylistic traits associated with this designation. Mannerist imagery frequently pushes the boundaries of fantasy and imagination with artists looking to art, rather than nature, as a model, as Parmigianino was clearly doing in his painting. Mannerism is therefore a confusing term, subject to radically different interpretations. When the term was first widely used in the 17th century, it was intended as a pejorative label. It was used to negatively characterize Italian renaissance art created between 1520 and 1600 that was seen by these later audiences as overly stylized and tasteless, a debased departure from the classicism of Raphael and the high renaissance. With the rise of expressionism and abstraction in the 20th century, such negative views of this generation of artists subsided. Today, the English term “mannerism” is used to broadly designate 16th-century art throughout Europe (and even in places like the Americas in the 16th and 17th centuries) that is conspicuously artificial, often emotionally provocative, and designed to impress.

In sixteenth-century Italy, where what we now call mannerism is first evident, the term “mannerism” did not exist. What we do find is “maniera,” a term rooted in the word mano (hand). It was used in a straightforward way by contemporaries to simply designate style. The styles that the word maniera was used to describe were as varied as way the word style might be used today. Audrey Hepburn had style. So did David Bowie.
Maniera was also used in the 16th century to suggest “stylishness” itself, a self-conscious, artificial artistry that at times privileged fantasy over reality. Artists displaying maniera may consciously exploit their technical skill but ideally did so with seeming effortlessness, like we see in Parmigianino’s Madonna of the Long Neck. Artistic departures from visual reality were intended to demonstrate invention and refinement, learning and grace. One way to understand mannerism, popularized by late 20th-century scholars, is to think of it as the “stylish-style.”

Figure 8: Left: Alonso Berruguete, Abraham and Isaac, 1526–1532, polychromed wood, (89 x 46 x 32 cm) (Museo Nacional de Escultura, Valladolid; photo: Iglesia en Valladolid, CC BY-SA 2.0); right: Athanadoros, Hagesandros, and Polydoros of Rhodes, Laocoön and His Sons, early first century C.E., marble, 7'10 1/2″ high (Vatican Museums; photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Rather than seeing such images as breaking with renaissance visual developments, scholars now recognize mannerist imagery as continuing those explorations in new ways. While the artworks might seem to diverge from classical forms, these artists did actually invent new ways of engaging with the ancient past. One of the most influential artworks for mannerist artists was the Hellenistic sculpture of Laocoön and his sons, whose twisting, contorted bodies appealed to a variety of artists of this time, including the Burgundian artist Juan de Juni (who worked in Spain), Domenicos Theotokopoulos (known as El Greco), Alonso Berruguete, and Francesco Primaticcio. Berruguete frequently adapted aspects of the Laocoön in his sculpture to heighten the emotional expressiveness of his saintly figures, such as we find in his Abraham and Isaac.

Why mannerism?

Why do these elegant explorations take place after 1520? While there is no easy answer for the style’s emergence at this time, historical and religious developments, the tastes of powerful patrons, and the rising social status of the artist may all be key factors. Mannerism first developed in central Italy in the cities of Rome and Florence and it quickly spread. The reasons are many. The early and mid-16th century was a period of enormous social, economic, and political change witnessing the spread of Protestantism and the wars of religion that followed. The rise of capitalism and absolutism, colonization and exploitation of new lands and peoples, and new developments in the science of anatomy and optics also add to the era’s complexity. Some have attributed the new stylistic explorations of the period to a general neurosis resulting from this shifting context. The new contorted and exaggerated forms are deliberately unbalanced like the 16th century itself.
While mannerist qualities are found in secular works, like Bronzino’s *Allegory with Venus and Cupid*, this otherworldly, fantastical stylishness may have served a particular function for sacred subjects. The distortion, ambiguity, and supernatural beauty of many mannerist works may have heightened their emotional appeal to Christian audiences, inspiring a deeply personal devotional experience appropriate to this era of religious upheaval. On the Iberian Peninsula, mannerist artists like Berruguete or the painter Luis de Morales forged an expressive visual language that encouraged profoundly emotional and ecstatic religious devotion.
Mannerist art has been associated with the tastes of aristocratic patrons, particularly those within court circles where displays of wealth and appreciation for beautiful things helped cultivate an elite persona. The self-conscious artifice and deliberate complexity of these works would have appealed to patrons who were familiar with recent artistic developments and eager to show off their knowledge and good taste. The general rise in the status of the artist—particularly in central Italy where mannerism first developed over the course of the renaissance, may also have contributed to a rising taste in art that reflected an artist’s individual style. Previously, artists were regarded as humble craftsmen, practitioners of the “mechanical arts.” By the 1520s—thanks in part to high renaissance artists like Michelangelo, Raphael, Albrecht Dürer and others—visual artists could claim status as practitioners of a “liberal art,” placing them alongside scholars, poets, and other humanists. The stylistically specific creations of individual visual artists were increasingly valued as precious records of their individual ingenuity and intellect, it meant something to own a “Dürer” or a “Titian.” The pronounced stylishness of mannerist imagery unmistakably marked these works as creations of a unique maker.
The first mannerist artists

Mannerist visual strategies have local beginnings (from what we can tell) in Central Italy, although they begin to spread rapidly after their introduction. We find elements of the *maniera* among Raphael’s followers, such as in the work of Giulio Romano, who, along with Gian Francesco Penni, took over Raphael’s workshop in Rome upon the master’s untimely death. His work at Palazzo Tè (the pleasure villa of Federico II Gonzaga of Mantua), like the frescoes in the Sala dei Giganti (Hall of the Giants), is a creative interpretation of and playful riff upon the classical tradition, continuing renaissance fascination with the ancient past. Powerful, elongated figures writhe across painted walls and ceiling that are reminiscent of ancient sarcophagi. At the Palazzo, Romano even developed architectural spaces that appear to dissolve in place like ancient ruins.

While Michelangelo is typically associated with what is called high renaissance art, he also helped to shape the powerful visual language of what we now call the *maniera*. Michelangelo’s *Last Judgement*, painted upon the altar wall of the Sistine Chapel, is a complicated and intentionally terrifying vision of the end of time. With disconcerting jumps in scale, nude figures in contorted poses are spread across a blue sky, their souls and bodies bared before God as they either rise in glory or are crushed in despair. Michelangelo’s figures are heavy, their musculature overemphasized—these are the bodies of the afterlife, rooted in the artist’s imagination and the brawny nudes of antiquity rather than reality. His *maniera* is unmistakable.
Figure \(\PageIndex{13}\): Pontormo, *Entombment* (or Deposition from the Cross), oil on panel, 1525–28, Capponi Chapel, Santa Felicità, Florence (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)
Early mannerist qualities are found in the work of Florentine painter Andrea del Sarto, and his followers Jacopo Pontormo and Rosso Fiorentino. Pontormo’s *Deposition (or Entombment)*, created for the Capponi Chapel, has figures swirling across the picture plane, dislocated in time and space. No narrative elements, like the cross and concrete environment of Fra Angelico’s 1432 *Deposition*, serve to ground and clarify the image. The contorted figures and bizarre use of color recall more the work of Michelangelo than they do visual reality.

Ambiguous compositions, like Pontormo’s *Deposition*, seem to require sophisticated audiences already familiar with both visual and spiritual traditions. At the same time, a case may be made for the broader public appeal of such imagery. While the references to and departures from artistic tradition may not have been readily appreciated by non-elites, the disorienting effect of the image may have indeed spoken to any viewer familiar with the unsettling effects of grief.

Mannerism on the move

The forms explored by mannerist artists spread rapidly to other parts of Italy and to parts of northern Europe, the Iberian Peninsula, the Americas, and even Asia. In each area, mannerism developed differently, reflecting regional visual traditions, as well as cultural, political, and religious formations.
After the sack of Rome in 1527, the French King, Francis I, brought mannerist art to France by importing the Florentine artists Rosso Fiorentino and Benvenuto Cellini, as well as Francesco Primaticcio (who had trained with Giulio Romano). Under Francis’s patronage, these artists helped transform a rugged hunting lodge into the spectacular palace of Fontainebleau, and where a new form of mannerism would influence generations of French artists. The Italian Jesuit artist Bernardo Bitti would emigrate to Lima in the Spanish Viceroyalty of Peru, and paint large-scale paintings with the classicizing visual language of the maniera.
Artists from other European regions also trained in Italy, absorbing mannerist tendencies. Spanish artist Luis de Vargas spent time in Italy with artists like Sebastiano del Piombo and Giorgio Vasari (among others), bringing back what he learned and adapted to the Iberian Peninsula. Vargas would create elaborate retablos (altarpieces) filled with painting and sculpture, for the Cathedral and the Church of Santa Cruz in Seville.

Likewise, the Flemish painter Maarten de Vos, who is thought to have spent time in the workshop of Tintoretto (a Venetian mannerist artist), created images infused with rich color, elegant elongated figures, and an overtly decorative
style. Engravings of De Vos’s works circulated across Europe, and eventually found their way across the Atlantic Ocean to the Spanish viceroyalties.

In Prague, under the patronage of Holy Roman Emperor Rudolph II, the Dutch printmaker Hendrik Goltzius produced numerous engravings, such as *Apollo*, 1588, notable for their dramatic gestures, flamboyant figure treatment, and conspicuous display of artistic virtuosity. Goltzius would become one of the most influential mannerist printmakers of his day. Goltzius borrowed mannerist strategies from Bartholomaeus Spranger, a Flemish artist who studied and traveled in Italy, and brought drawings and ideas back to Rudolph II’s court.

Simply put, the spread of mannerism was global.

**Why mannerism matters**

The ambiguity of mannerism and often sensuous treatment of figures proved problematic for some. The Reformation brought with it a new scrutiny of religious images. The Augustinian monk Martin Luther and other Protestant leaders were concerned that images could mislead or be treated as idols. While the Catholic Church never wavered in its commitment to the validity of images as tools for religious practice, the style of religious art did become an issue. At the Council of Trent (1545–1563), a series of meetings intended to solidify Catholic doctrine and strengthen the threatened church, it was declared that religious images must be clear, unambiguous, and lead viewers to faithful contemplation.
should be for celebrating and instructing in the faith, not for showcasing artistic skill. The sensuosity, ambiguity, and conspicuous artistry of mannerism was not to be tolerated in sacred art.

![Image of El Greco's Adoration of the Shepherds](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory_of_Art/08%3A_Europe_1300_-_1800/8.06%3A_Italy_in_the_16th...)  

**Figure 8.20:** El Greco (Domenikos Theotokopoulos), *Adoration of the Shepherds*, c. 1612–1614, oil on canvas, 126 x 71" / 319 x 180 cm ([Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory_of_Art/08%3A_Europe_1300_-_1800/8.06%3A_Italy_in_the_16th...)  

This call for conservatism in art on the part of the Catholic [Counter Reformation](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory_of_Art/08%3A_Europe_1300_-_1800/8.06%3A_Italy_in_the_16th...), the movement behind the Council of Trent, did not bring an end to mannerist explorations. The style continued in new ways and across the global Catholic landscape. Devout Catholics, such as the Duke of Florence, Cosimo I de’Medici (who was eager to garner the Pope’s approval in his quest to become Grand Duke of Tuscany), continued to patronize mannerist forms in paint and stone—and even tapestries. El Greco, an artist who is thought to almost perfectly embody the Counter-Reformation Church’s desire to produce emotionally affective religious works, borrowed a great deal from mannerism. In fact, El Greco’s work demonstrates that mannerism extends beyond the sixteenth century, attesting once again to the ways in which visual strategies ebbed and flowed differently in various parts of the world.
Later artists are indebted to the mannerists. The dynamic compositions, rich color choices, and dramatic brushwork of later Baroque traditions all owe a debt to mannerist experimentation.

**Additional resources**


**Renaissance woman: Isabella d’Este**

by [DR. LISA BOUTIN VITELA](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory_of_Art/08%3A_Europe_1300_-_1800/8.06%3A_Italy_in_the_16th_…)

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In European history classes, we often hear about renaissance men: Cosimo de’ Medici, Leonardo da Vinci, and Niccolò Machiavelli. Where were the women? The most famous female patron of the Italian renaissance was Isabella d’Este Gonzaga (1474–1539), marchioness of a territory in northern Italy called Mantua. Despite the restrictions women faced, her art collections demonstrate important renaissance themes: possessing the ancient world through the collection of antiquities, demonstrating erudition through the acquisition of classical narratives, and fashioning an identity through portraiture and symbols.

A desire for antiquities

Isabella’s letters reveal a longing for ancient art objects and sculptures. A bust of the Roman emperor Octavian, an onyx vase, a Venus given by Cesare Borgia (the possible illegitimate son of Pope Alexander VI), and a Cupid attributed to the ancient Greek sculptor Praxiteles were documented in her collection. Isabella displayed the Praxitelean Cupid next to a Sleeping Cupid by the renaissance artist Michelangelo in order to compare these ancient and modern sculptures.
When Isabella d’Este could not acquire an ancient sculpture, she turned to the sculptor known as Antico to create statuettes in gold and bronze in an antique style. One bronze sculpture depicted the Greco-Roman hero Hercules lifting and crushing the giant Antaeus in a nude wrestling contest. Cast in 1519, Isabella’s *Hercules and Antaeus* is noteworthy for its depiction of musculature. The bronze sculpture was marked with an inscription of ownership, D / ISABEL / LA / M E MAR (Divine Isabella, Marchioness of Mantua). Isabella’s *Hercules and Antaeus* measures about 15 inches tall. Scholars have considered how these small sculptures could be examined closely and demonstrate the interactive nature of early modern art reception.
A careful patron of portraits

Surviving portraits of Isabella d’Este and accounts of her commissions indicate her careful control of representations of her physical appearance. The sculptor and medallist Gian Cristoforo Romano cast bronze medals featuring an idealized Isabella in profile on the obverse and zodiac symbols on the reverse. The profile portrait shows Isabella wearing a substantial necklace framed by a low, angular neckline and her hair tied back in braids and looped locks surrounded by her name and title. The reverse features a personification of a figure in sheer drapery and contrapposto stance, who has been interpreted as Virgo, Astrology, Hygeia, or Victory, with the sign of Sagittarius above surrounded by the inscription BENEMERENTIUM ERGO (variously translated as “On account of great merit”[1], “Because of merit” [2], “Because of the deserving [stars]”[3]). Isabella distributed bronze versions of the medal to those she favored and retained one medal created in gold and embellished with diamonds and enamel.

Figure \( \PageIndex{24} \): Giancristoforo Romano, *Portrait medal of Isabella d’Este* [obverse], 1495 – 1498, gold with diamonds and enamel, 7 cm diameter (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna)

Leonardo da Vinci also drew an idealized version of Isabella d’Este’s likeness (top of page). While never completed as a painting, Leonardo’s drawing of Isabella (c. 1499–1500) provides a detailed depiction of the marchioness with a profile view of her face and frontal view of her shoulders. Leonardo disguised Isabella’s substantial figure in her billowing sleeves. The attention to her garment reveals Isabella’s interest in fashion, which was a frequent subject of her letters. A drawing after Leonardo’s original reveals that both of Isabella’s hands may have been visible and that one hand gestured toward a book, an attribute of erudition, before Leonardo’s original drawing was cropped along the bottom edge.
Spaces for Collecting

Soon after Isabella’s marriage to Francesco II Gonzaga, the marchioness developed a space for a painting gallery – her studiolo – and a room to display her growing collections – the grotta. Isabella’s original studiolo and grotta were constructed within the Castello di San Giorgio, the medieval castle that forms part of the Ducal Palace in Mantua. Later, these rooms were moved to the Corte Vecchia of the Ducal Palace. The ground-floor location of these later rooms allowed for the addition of a secret garden and easier access for Isabella, who struggled with mobility as she aged.

Isabella sought paintings with mythological themes from significant renaissance artists for her studiolo. The program, which scholars continue to debate, was developed in consultation with the humanist scholar Paride da Ceresara. While seven paintings have been interpreted as allegories of virtue conquering vice, another interpretation emphasizes the paintings’ roles within the space of the studiolo and within the context of humanist literature at the Mantuan court.[4] The painter Andrea Mantegna delivered the first two paintings Mars and Venus (or Parnassus) in 1497 and Pallas expelling the Vices in 1502. After much correspondence with Isabella, in 1505, the painter Pietro Perugino delivered the third
painting for the studiolo *The Combat of Love and Chastity* (or *Battle between Lasciviousness and Chastity*) featuring Pallas and Diana fighting Venus and Cupid. Perugino’s painting did not please Isabella; she wrote that it appeared deficient in comparison to Mantegna’s canvases.

Following Mantegna’s death, the new Gonzaga court painter, Lorenzo Costa, created a coronation scene, variously titled *Coronation of a Woman Poet* or *Allegory of Isabella d’Este’s Coronation* (c. 1504–06), and a second painting entitled *The Reign of Comus* (c. 1507–11). Antonio da Correggio contributed *Allegory of Virtue* and *Allegory of Vice* (c. 1528–30) once the *studiolo* was established in the Corte Vecchia. The paintings feature mythological goddesses, especially Pallas Athena, Diana, and Venus, demonstrating Isabella’s humanist knowledge and her preference for female figures who exemplified desirable characteristics for the marchioness.

Figure (\PageIndex{27})): Pietro Perugino, *The Combat of Love and Chastity* (or *Battle between Lasciviousness and Chastity*), 1505, oil on canvas, 160 x 191 cm (Musée du Louvre, Paris)

Following Mantegna’s death, the new Gonzaga court painter, Lorenzo Costa, created a coronation scene, variously titled *Coronation of a Woman Poet* or *Allegory of Isabella d’Este’s Coronation* (c. 1504–06), and a second painting entitled *The Reign of Comus* (c. 1507–11). Antonio da Correggio contributed *Allegory of Virtue* and *Allegory of Vice* (c. 1528–30) once the *studiolo* was established in the Corte Vecchia. The paintings feature mythological goddesses, especially Pallas Athena, Diana, and Venus, demonstrating Isabella’s humanist knowledge and her preference for female figures who exemplified desirable characteristics for the marchioness.

Figure (\PageIndex{28})): Antonio da Correggio, *Allegory of Virtue* (left), 1528-30, tempera on canvas, 142 x 86 cm (Musée du Louvre, Paris); *Allegory of Vice* (right), 1528-30, tempera on canvas, 149 x 88 cm (Musée du Louvre, Paris)
In her later rooms in the Corte Vecchia, Isabella’s *studiolo* was connected to her *grotta* through a carved marble doorway attributed to Gian Cristoforo Romano. The *grotta* also featured Isabella’s personal symbols or *imprese* (emblems) ornamenting the ceiling. Gian Cristoforo Romano’s gold medal and Antico’s *Hercules and Antaeus* (mentioned above) were also on display in the *grotta*. The inventory conducted after Isabella’s death revealed the extensive collections acquired over her lifetime.

**Beyond the Ducal Palace**

While the Ducal Palace provided spaces to display her collections, Isabella looked forward to leaving its dark, damp environment. Her suburban villa, the Palazzo di Porto, provided an opportunity for escape with its gardens, fruit trees, and loggia. This environment was ideal for displaying and possibly using Isabella’s maiolica service, as earthenware dishes were preferred to silver in country villas. Decorated with mythological and *Old Testament* narratives, as well as her coat-of-arms and emblems, the twenty-three surviving dishes of the maiolica service used classical imagery to emphasize Isabella’s personal virtue in a manner that echoed her collections in the Ducal Palace.

![Figure 29: Nicola da Urbino, Armorial Plate (tondino): The story of King Midas, c. 1520–25, maiolica (tin-glazed earthenware), 27.5 cm diameter (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Robert Lehman Collection, 1975, photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory_of_Art/08%3A_Europe_1300_-_1800/8.06%3A_Italy_in_the_16th...)

While often identified as the most significant female collector of the renaissance, Isabella d’Este is notable among all early modern patrons, both male and female, due to the variety of her collections, which span a broad range of materials, iconographic sources, and historical periods. Although Isabella’s paintings and art objects have long been dispersed from their original locations, the marchioness’s rooms in the Corte Vecchia remain in Mantua, Italy and allow us to imagine the original splendor of this collection.

**Notes**


**Additional Resources:**

Isabella d’Este Archive: Virtual Studiolo project

Isabella d’Este Archive: The Illustrated Credenza

Louvre: Portrait of Isabella d’Este

Louvre: Isabella d’Este’s Studiolo

National Gallery of Art and the Oxford University Press: Isabella Collects


**The Medici collect the Americas**

by [DR. LAUREN KILROY-EWBank](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory_of_Art/08%3A_Europe_1300_-_1800/8.06%3A_Italy_in_the_16th...)
Americana and cabinets of curiosities

After Christopher Columbus landed on the Caribbean island of Hispaniola in 1492 and the subsequent Spanish invasion and colonization of much of the Americas, material objects, flora, and fauna from these faraway lands were shipped back to Europe where many people perceived them as exotic items of wonder and fascination. Americana—objects sent from the Americas—were found in numerous cabinets of curiosities (also known as Wunderkammern). Cabinets of curiosities first appeared in sixteenth-century Europe as a way to display items perceived as exotic, curious, and wondrous. The strategy of collecting Americana and displaying it in cabinets of curiosities offered a way to engage with the Americas for those who might never undertake the voyage. In a sense, we might even say that this allowed Europeans to take possession of these distant lands.

The origin of cabinets of curiosities in the sixteenth century coincides with the discovery, by Europeans, that the world was much larger than they previously believed. It also coincides with the invasion and the colonization of the Americas and the millions of people who lived there. Technological and scientific advancements in mapping and navigation spurred interest in collecting items from around the globe, as well as the instruments needed to create maps and sail the seas.
Cabinets of curiosity created a microcosm of a world that could be studied, ordered, and understood, but they were not spaces in which just anyone could encounter and study such objects, these were personal spaces for the elite (and anyone they invited). They often combined human-made (artificialia), natural elements (naturalia), and scientific objects and instruments (scientifica), as we see in Ferrante Imperato's 1599 illustration of a Wunderkammern.

Of the naturalia sent from the Americas, living animals—especially birds—were among the most popular. Turkeys, parrots, and macaws were among the birds that arrived in Europe. The armored appearance of armadillos were also a continuous source of wonder; and their shell retained its shape, even if they died on the transatlantic voyage. Apparently, some were even gilded and displayed on pillars in Europe.

Among the human-made items from the Americas found in Renaissance curiosity cabinets are Olmec masks, Mesoamerican codices (such as the Codex Vaticanus A), New Spanish featherworks, Brazilian hammocks, Taino objects, and more. Among the most exceptional objects to first enter European Wunderkammern were those sent by Hernán Cortés in 1519, as gifts to the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V. Turquoise masks, golden figurines, featherworks, and more were met with excitement and amazement by people in Toledo, Valladolid, and eventually Brussels. Albrecht Dürer even remarked that “In all my life I have seen nothing that made my heart rejoice so much as these things. Here I have found wonderful, costly things and I have marveled at the subtle ingenuity of people in strange lands.”[1]

The Medici Popes

Among the most avid collectors of Americana were members of the powerful Florentine Medici family. Medici popes Leo X (Giovanni di Lorenzo de’ Medici, who reigned as Pope from 1513–21) and Clement VII (Giulio di Giuliano de’ Medici, who reigned from 1523–34) collected Americana—and in fact were some of the earliest to do so. They never traveled across the Atlantic, yet their desire to understand these lands increased, especially with ongoing evangelization attempts. Leo X commissioned frescoes filled with American flora and fauna. For instance, he commissioned the artist Giovanni di Udine to paint maize (also known as corn and first domesticated by indigenous peoples in southern Mexico about 10,000 years ago) in festoons in the Loggias (designed by Raphael) in the Vatican palace.

Udine had, though, painted the first known depictions of maize earlier, between 1515–17, in the festoons around frescoes by Raphael in the Loggia of Psyche within the Villa Farnesina in Rome, which belonged to the wealthy Sienese banker Agostino Chigi. Pope Clement VII was likewise among the earliest patrons to commission artworks that depicted subjects related to this foreign world which he had never seen with his own eyes. In his Villa Madama (Sala di Giulio Romano, c. 1520) in Rome, he had Udine paint a naturalistic turkey along with other birds like peacocks.

https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory_of_Art/08%3A_Europe_1300_-_1800/8.06%3A_Italy_in_the_16th_century/8.06.1%3A_The_Medici_Popes
Popes Leo X and Clement VII also actively acquired Americana as well. In 1514, the Portuguese king, Manuel I, sent Leo X a gift of flora and fauna from the Americas and India. It is likely that part of this gift included plants like maize and beans from the Americas, as well as the special gift of an elephant, called Hanno, from India, of whom Leo was extremely fond.

The Ñudzavui (Mixtec) Codex Vindobonensis Mexicanus I, one of the few surviving pre-conquest Mesoamerican screenfold codices, was owned by Clement VII. The King of Portugal reportedly sent it to Clement VII, along with other gifts from the Americas, sometime before 1523. A decade later, the Medici pope received another gift of objects from the Spanish Dominican friar, Domingo de Betanzos, who had traveled to New Spain to aid in evangelizing the indigenous populations. The Dominican friar apparently gifted the pope featherworks, Ñudzavui turquoise masks, and codices.
Grand Duke Cosimo I de’ Medici (who reigned from 1537–1574) and his wife, Duchess Eleanora di Toledo, like their Medici family members, never traveled to the Americas. But they too continued to acquire plants, animals, and other objects from these far-away lands. They also commissioned artworks that made visual reference to the Americas, possibly as a way to participate in a vicarious conquest of these foreign peoples and places. Cosimo was partly able to collect Americana because of his marriage to Eleanora, a noblewoman of the Spanish court. Their marriage in 1539 helped to cement a Medici alliance with Spain, which would aid Cosimo in his collecting practices. The two grew maize, and apparently even started to cultivate tomatoes and medicinal plants (also introduced from the Americas). Cosimo had live birds, including turkeys, at Medici estates. Beyond their interest in living flora and fauna, the Medici Duke and Duchess also had also obtained a number of objects from the Americas, including mosaic masks, objects made of jade, and feather cloaks.

How items such as these were listed in Medici inventories reveals the challenges that Europeans faced when classifying Amerindian objects. In a 1553 inventory, Aztec masks were listed under ‘jewelry’ (goia), but not long thereafter in another inventory they were listed as “theatrical masks” (maschera) in an attempt to compare them with recognizable
European forms with clear functions. At this time there was also an interest in Greco-Roman theatrical masks, so perhaps the Aztec masks were eventually believed to function in a similar capacity. This reframing of Mesoamerican masks—from jewelry to masks—could also relate to broader ways in which Europeans were trying to understand and reconcile American objects, many of which were unfamiliar to them. [2]

Grand Dukes Francesco I (1574 to 87) and Ferdinando I (1587 to 1609)

![Jacopo Ligozzi, Psittacus Ararauna (Blue and Gold Macaw), c. 1580-1600, 67 x 45.6 cm (Uffizi)](image)

Cosimo and Eleanora's eldest son, Francesco, was similarly drawn to the naturalia and artificialia of the Americas, sharing his father's keen interest in birds and plants. At one point, he commissioned Jacopo Ligozzi to create naturalistic drawings of local and exotic plants and animals, some of which came from the Americas. Among the most remarkable are his depictions of a pineapple, a macaw, and the American century plant (*Agave americana*), all drawn circa 1570.
Ligozzi had live models on which to base his clearly articulated images, and his almost microscopic details were praised. Francesco’s interest in the American *naturalia* extended to his experiments as well. In the Casino di San Marco in Florence which had workshops, including the Medici porcelain factory, Francesco conducted experiments and studied his collection of plants and animals. Like his father, he continued to grow plants, some of them from the Americas, in a nearby botanical garden. He would use some in his alchemical experiments, creating medicines and other distillations. Francesco often gifted objects and *naturalia* from the Americas to other high-ranking individuals who were similarly fascinated with items from distant lands. One sumptuous gift was given to Duke Albrecht V of Bavaria in 1572, and it included featherworks, gold and silver figurines, parrots, food items, and more.

Francesco’s younger brother, Ferdinando, also had a desire to collect Americana. As a cardinal in Rome, he acquired numerous objects, such as multiple featherworks, one of which was a bishop’s mitre. He also came into ownership of the *Florentine Codex*, an encyclopedia produced between 1575 and 1577 under the direction of the Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagun along with indigenous collaborators. This twelve volume text included discussion of cochineal, which produced a highly coveted red dye, along with other types of resources from the Americas. One can imagine Ferdinando’s interest in possibly learning from the Florentine Codex how to manufacture cochineal.
When Francesco died in 1587, and Ferdinando became Grand Duke of Florence, he moved from Rome to Florence with his collection. Ligozzi, who had remained in the employ of the Medici court even after Francesco’s death, would then paint, at the request of Ferdinando, one of his most well-known and final botanical images: the *Passiflora coerulea*, or the passion flower (or Granadilla or maracot originally). Previously unknown to Europeans, it had only recently become known, and sent across the Atlantic to Europe. The plant sparked immense curiosity because of the manner in which it visually evoked the crown of thorns, and so became a powerful Christian symbol.

**Knowing the unknown**

Medici fascination with Americana in the sixteenth century was certainly not unique. Across Europe, many powerful individuals sought to acquire objects taken from the Americas, as a way to know the unknown, to exert some control over the colonial processes underway, and to possess exotic and rare things. The Medici popes and three grand dukes provide a more focused example of the ways in which Americana intersected with European interests in conquest and colonization, science and alchemy, and collecting and visual culture in the sixteenth century.

**Acknowledgments**

Thanks are due to Lydia Parker.

**Footnotes**


**Additional resources**

*The Medici Collections of the Museo Galileo, on Google Arts and Culture*

*Collecting for the Kunstkammer on The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*


**Galileo Galilei**

*by DR. JOSEPH DAUBEN*
Renaissance artists—painters, sculptors and architects—had been observing nature with a special interest in depicting it faithfully and realistically from the early 15th century on. In fact, by turning to the problem of art and science in the Renaissance, it is possible to find the roots for Galileo’s own peculiarly realistic—and idealistic—approach to nature. The values and attitudes Galileo held were ones he shared with Italian humanists, including philosophers, artisans, and even musicians.

The experiment at Pisa

Galileo Galilei was born near Pisa in 1564—the same year in which Shakespeare was born and the year in which Michelangelo and Calvin died. After studying at the University of Pisa, he was appointed to the chair of mathematics—and as the photograph below reminds us, it was in Pisa that the famous leaning tower might well have suggested Galileo’s most famous experiment.
First of all, the theory that virtually everyone accepted at the time, was the traditional theory of Aristotle—who believed that heavier objects fall more quickly than lighter ones. Consider, for example, two objects—one twice as heavy as the other. Imagine Aristotle at the top of the leaning tower of Pisa, dropping off two cannonballs, one twice as heavy as the other. According to Aristotle, it should fall twice as fast. If it were four times heavier, it should fall four times faster.

But in fact, what the leaning tower of Pisa type of experiment demonstrates, when actually performed, is that Aristotle was wrong, that no matter what the difference in weight, two heavy objects will fall simultaneously at virtually the same speed. If Aristotle were right, this could only happen if the larger stones were dropped from a higher point in the clouds—but at virtually the same time—or that the lighter ones started falling earlier than the heavier ones—neither of which seemed very probable to Galileo. Instead, the simplest explanation was simply that heavy or light, all stones fell simultaneously with the same speed.
His first telescope

In any case, Galileo’s interest soon turned from falling bodies to astronomy. Rumors of an invention made by a Dutch spectacle-maker reached Venice, and these led Galileo to construct his first telescope in July of 1609. It wasn’t long before Galileo began to make a series of startling observations, including the discovery of innumerable stars never seen before, mountains on the moon, the movements of which he carefully plotted from day to day.

He was soon to publish these discoveries in a book, the *Siderius Nuncius* (*Starry Messenger*) which caused an overnight sensation. Galileo named the moons of Jupiter the “medicean planets”—in honor of his former student Cosmo and the famous Medici family—thanks to which he was shortly thereafter appointed Chief Mathematician and Philosopher to the Grand Duke of Tuscany in Florence.

The heavens are imperfect

All of these discoveries—and others—posed yet more direct challenges to Aristotle’s idea of the perfection of the heavens (namely that the heavens were perfect, immutable, unchanging). Some Aristotelian astronomers refused to look through Galileo’s telescope, others tried to deny what he had seen. The Roman Catholic Church, however, was becoming increasingly concerned—and a young Dominican, Tommaso Caccini, was the first to denounce Galileo officially and the Copernican theory his observations seemed to support from the pulpit during a sermon in Santa Maria
Novella.

**Arrest and trial**

A few years later, as concerns mounted, Galileo was officially advised by Cardinal Bellarmino on the Pope’s behalf to proceed cautiously and speak only hypothetically about the Copernican theory, but not as if it were actually real.

Galileo returned to Florence and continued work on his book, but now he gave more emphasis to mathematical arguments rather than to experimental or physical arguments—as the Pope wished. But when the book finally appeared in 1632, it raised an immediate storm of protest leading immediately to Galileo’s arrest and famous trial by the Inquisition in Rome that found him guilty of having published a heretical book. In the end, Galileo had no choice but to repent and confess that he had gone too far.

![Bust of Galileo](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory_of_Art/08%3A_Europe_1300_-_1800/8.06%3A_Italy_in_the_16th__…)

He was sentenced to life imprisonment, which he spent, for the most part, at his own villa at Arcetri near Florence, under the surveillance of the Inquisition. Even so, Galileo, in his last years, now undertook his last and perhaps greatest work, his *Discourses on the Two New Sciences*, which has been described as “the cornerstone of modern physics.” When Galileo died in 1642, totally blind and almost 78 years old, Pope Urban VIII did not forget his feud with Galileo, and refused to permit his burial with a suitable monument—instead, Galileo was buried unceremoniously in the Church of Santa Croce, in Florence. A few hundred years later were his remains moved to their present magnificent tomb, opposite that of Michelangelo, near the entrance to the church.

**Nature is mathematical**

Galileo believed that nature was inherently mathematical, that mathematics was the language of nature—that mathematics was the key to understanding the reality behind the appearance of natural phenomena (for example, accelerated and parabolic motions). What Galileo achieved in revolutionizing physics was to show how observation, careful measurement, and attention to the structure of a given event—all led to an appreciation of hidden causes that ultimately expressed the pervasive mathematical unity of all nature.
Galileo and Renaissance art

by DR. JOSEPH DAUBEN

Renaissance artists had contributed greatly to man’s knowledge by the time Galileo was doing his first work at Pisa. The humanist artists of the Italian renaissance had performed their own dissections to promote the study of anatomy, they had invented mathematical perspective to make possible the accurate, realistic portrayal of physical space. The literary humanists had managed to revive all sorts of classics, in particular the works of Plato. Christopher Columbus had directly challenged the limits to the finite European world of Ptolemy’s geography. In short, the bounds of human knowledge were expanding at a rapid rate.

Thus it comes as no surprise that Italian artists of Galileo’s day responded favorably, even enthusiastically, to the new discoveries that science itself was making. It was Galileo’s friend, Lodovico Cigoli, who incorporated the latest discoveries of his telescope, hot off the press in Galileo’s *Siderius Nuncius* (1610) in his own version of the *Assumption of the Virgin* painted just two years later in 1612. In Cigoli’s painting, notice the treatment of the moon at the Virgin’s feet—rendered as though it were seen though the telescope, exactly as Galileo had recorded it in his own pen and ink drawing only a few years earlier.¹

Mathematics is the language of nature

In closing, how can we draw together all of the diverse strands of renaissance artistic realism, especially Brunelleschi’s discovery of perspective, with Galileo’s experiments on acceleration and his analysis of projectile motion?

It is clear that renaissance artists were seeking a new world, thanks in part to mathematics and the new perspective, literally, that mathematics provided. Galileo not only inherited this perspective, but a philosophical sense as well that had been inspired by renaissance philosophers (especially Neoplatonists), namely that the underlying reality of the world we perceive is essentially mathematical.
This was exactly the point made in Riccioli’s dramatic depiction of the hand of God, creating the world according to mathematical principles, number and weight and measure written clearly on his fingers to make no mistake about the inherent, essential mathematical character of the physical world.

Renaissance artists and architects had already succeeded in translating physical space into the mathematical terms of proportion and perspective to produce works that tricked the eye and rivaled nature.

Galileo used mathematics with equal skill to reveal the underlying structure of physical space and motion to show that these, too, could be reduced to mathematical analysis. In connecting physical space and real motion—which could be observed experimentally—with the ideal and uniform change of his neo-platonic, mathematical world, Galileo also serves to bridge the early stages of the scientific revolution in Europe—and figures like Copernicus and Kepler—with the later unifying achievements of Descartes, Newton and Leibniz.

Thus in a very direct way, it was mathematics that not only facilitated the art of renaissance perspective, but provided the key as well to Galileo’s new science of nature. In both cases, the essence of physical reality was understood in terms that could be reduced to basic mathematical principles.


   Edgerton has argued that Cigoli’s moon was ‘no doubt inspired by one of Galileo’s original drawings, but a comparison between them immediately reveals that the painter did not, in fact, faithfully copy any of the drawings or, for that matter, any of the engravings published in the Sidereus nuncius.’ In light of Cigoli’s professed difficulty with Latin, it is also unlikely that he relied on Galileo’s written description. We do know, however, that by early 1612 Cigoli was in possession of a telescope, through which, as he proudly informed Galileo, he saw the moon ‘very well.’ He may, therefore, have made his own drawings of the moon in conjunction with his work on the fresco, inspired by what he had learned from Galileo and perhaps, too, in an effort to corroborate his friend’s discoveries in the face of mounting criticism in Rome.

Additional resources:

The Partnership of Art and Science: The Moon of Cigoli and Galileo


Central and Northern Italy in the 16th century

This is a period of ambitious commissions—the Sistine Chapel ceiling, the Tomb of Pope Julius II...

1500 - 1600
Leonardo da Vinci

About Leonardo

by DR. STEVEN ZUCKER and DR. BETH HARRIS

The heavens often rain down the richest gifts on human beings, but sometimes they bestow with lavish abundance upon a single individual beauty, grace and ability, so that whatever he does, every action is so divine that he distances all other men, and clearly displays how his greatness is a gift of God and not an acquirement of human art. Men saw this in Leonardo. (Vasari, Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects)

Leonardo: From Florence to Milan

Leonardo was born illegitimate to a prominent Tuscan family of potters and notaries. He may have traveled from Vinci to Florence where his father worked for several powerful families including the Medici. At age seventeen, Leonardo reportedly apprenticed with the Florentine artist Verrocchio. Here, Leonardo gained an appreciation for the achievements of Giotto and Masaccio and in 1472 he joined the artists’ guild, Compagnia di San Luca.
Because of his family’s ties, Leonardo benefited when Lorenzo de’ Medici (the Magnificent) ruled Florence. By 1478 Leonardo was completely independent of Verrocchio and may have then met the exiled Ludovico Sforza, the future Duke of Milan (Ludovico ruled as regent from 1481-94, before becoming Duke). In 1482, Leonardo arrived in Milan bearing a silver lyre (which he may have been able to play), a gift for Ludovico Sforza from the Florentine ruler, Lorenzo the Magnificent. Ludovico sought to transform Milan into a center of humanist learning to rival Florence.
Leonardo flourished in this intellectual environment. He opened a studio, received numerous commissions, instructed students, and began to systematically record his scientific and artistic investigations in a series of notebooks. The archetypal "renaissance man," Leonardo was an unrivaled painter, an accomplished architect, an engineer, cartographer, and scientist (he was particularly interested in biology and physics). He was influenced by a variety of ancient texts including Plato’s *Timaeus*, Ptolemy’s *Cosmography*, and Vitruvius’s *On Architecture*. Leonardo is credited with having assisted Luca Pacioli with his treatise, *Divina Proportione* (1509). Joining the practical and the theoretical, Leonardo designed numerous mechanical devices for battle, including a submarine, and even experimented with designs for flight.

In a now famous letter (likely written in the early 1480s), Leonardo listed his talents to the future Duke, focusing mostly on his abilities as a military engineer. The letter begins:

> Having until now sufficiently studied and examined the experiments of all those who claim to be experts and inventors of war machines, and having found that their machines do not differ in the least from those ordinarily in use, I shall make so bold, without wanting to cause harm to anyone, as to address myself to Your Excellency to divulge my secrets to him, and offer to demonstrate to him, at his pleasure, all the things briefly enumerated below.
In ten short paragraphs, Leonardo enumerated the service he could perform—he said (among other things) that he
could build bridges, tunnels, fortresses, and “make siege guns, mortars and other machines, of beautiful and practical
shape, completely different from what is generally in use.” What might seem amazing to us is that it is not until the very
last paragraph that Leonardo mentions art, and he mentions it so modestly! Here is what he wrote:

In time of peace, I believe I am capable of giving you as much satisfaction as anyone, whether it be in
architecture, for the construction of public or private buildings, or in bringing water from one place to
another. Item, I can sculpt in marble, bronze or terracotta; while in painting, my work is the equal of
anyone’s.

Return to Florence, then France

In 1489, Leonardo secured a long awaited contract with Ludovico and was honored with the title, “The Florentine
Apelles,” a reference to an ancient Greek painter revered for his great naturalism. Leonardo returned to Florence when
Ludovico was deposed by the French King, Charles VII. While there, Leonardo would meet the Niccolò Machiavelli,
author of The Prince and his future patron, François I (who ruled France from 1515-47). In 1516, after numerous
invitations, Leonardo traveled to France and joined the royal court. Leonardo died on May 2, 1519 in the king’s chateau
at Cloux.

Leonardo’s death and the changing status of the artist

Vasari, who wrote Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects (1550), had this to say about
Leonardo’s death:

Finally, having grown old, he remained ill many months, and, feeling himself near to death, asked to
have himself diligently informed of the teaching of the Catholic faith, and of the good way and holy
Christian religion; and then, with many moans, he confessed and was penitent; and although he
could not raise himself well on his feet, supporting himself on the arms of his friends and servants,
he was pleased to take devoutly the most holy Sacrament, out of his bed. The King, who was wont
often and lovingly to visit him, then came into the room; wherefore he, out of reverence, having
raised himself to sit upon the bed, giving him an account of his sickness and the circumstances of it,
showed withal how much he had offended God and mankind in not having worked at his art as he
should have done. Thereupon he was seized by a paroxysm, the messenger of death; for which
reason the King having risen and having taken his head, in order to assist him and show him favour,
to then end that he might alleviate his pain, his spirit, which was divine, knowing that it could not
have any greater honour, expired in the arms of the King.

This story is a good indication of the changing status of the artist—Leonardo, who spent the last years of his life in
France working for King Francis I, was often visited by the King (remember that the artist was considered only a skilled
artisan in the Middle Ages and for much of the Early Renaissance). In the High Renaissance, in contrast, we find that
artists are considered intellectuals, and that they keep company with the highest levels of society. Quite a change! All of
this has to do with Humanism in the Renaissance of course, and the growing recognition of the achievement of great individuals. Artists in the Early Renaissance insisted that they should be considered intellectuals because they worked with their minds as well as with their hands. They defended this position by pointing to the scientific tools that they used to make their work more naturalistic—the study of human anatomy, of mathematics and geometry, of linear perspective. These were clearly all intellectual pursuits.

Look closely at this self-portrait. Isn’t it clear that Leonardo thought of himself as a thinker, a philosopher, an intellectual?

**Leonardo’s naturalism**

Ancient Greek physicians dissected cadavers. The early church’s rejection of the science of the classical world, along with the possibility of bodily resurrection led to prohibitions against dissection. Both Leonardo and Michelangelo performed them—probably exclusively on the bodies of executed criminals. According to his own count, Leonardo dissected 30 corpses during his lifetime.

**Additional resources:**

Universal Leonardo
Leonardo, Letter to the Duke of Milan

by DR. DAVID DROGIN

Video \(\PageIndex{2}\): Leonardo da Vinci, Letter to the Duke of Milan

Leonardo: Anatomist

by NATURE VIDEO
Leonardo and his drawings

by THE BRITISH MUSEUM

Born near the town of Vinci in 1452, Leonardo trained in the Florentine workshop of Andrea Verrocchio (1435-88). His first masterpiece was the unfinished Adoration of the Magi (1481, Uffizi, Florence). In 1481-2 he travelled to Milan to work for the Duke, where he painted the Virgin of the Rocks (Musée du Louvre, Paris—a later version exists in the National Gallery, London) and the Last Supper (1495-7; Convent of Santa Maria delle Grazie (Refectory), Milan). In 1499 he travelled to Mantua and Venice, arriving back in Florence in 1500.
In 1503 he began the cartoon of the *Battle of Anghiari* with its scenes of ferocious fighting for the wall in the Great Council Chamber of the Palazzo Vecchio, but this work was never completed. He returned to Milan in 1506 for seven years and in 1513 he moved to Rome. The French king, Francis I, invited him to his court and about 1516, Leonardo settled in the manor of Cloux, near Amboise in the Loire valley. Leonardo died there in 1519.

Leonardo is arguably the greatest draughtsman in Western art. He was technically superb in whichever medium he used: silverpoint, pen and ink, black and particularly red chalks. Driven by his scientific curiosity, he studied the world around him in minutest detail, making botanical and anatomical studies. In his drawings and paintings he created figures which lived, breathed, moved and gave expression to their emotions.

This is one of a number of sheets of drawings by Leonardo in which he designed instruments of war. He drew them while working for Ludovico Sforza, duke of Milan (1494–99). Under each drawing in ink and brown wash, Leonardo has written words of explanation in his characteristic reversed writing (that is it needs to be read in a mirror).

At the top of the sheet is a chariot with scythes on all sides. Below it Leonardo has written: “when this travels through your men, you will wish to raise the shafts of the scythes so that you will not injure anyone on your side.” At lower left is
an upturned armored car without its roof, showing “the way the car is arranged inside” with the line “eight men operate it and the same men turn the car and pursue the enemy.” At lower right, the same tank-like vehicle is shown moving and firing its guns, with the line below: “this is good for breaking the ranks, but you will want to follow it up.” At the far right is a more conventional weapon of the time, a large pike or halberd, perhaps more ceremonial than practical.

Leonardo’s fertile imagination and scientific knowledge are here combined in the creation of war machines for his warlike patron. It is highly unlikely, however, that any of these machines were ever made or used in contemporary warfare. Indeed, as Leonardo himself wrote in his Notebooks, such new weapons were often as dangerous to their users as to the enemy.

**Suggested readings:**


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**Leonardo, Adoration of the Magi**

by [DR. STEVEN ZUCKER](https://human.libretexts.org/) and [DR. BETH HARRIS](https://human.libretexts.org/)
Video \(PageIndex(4)\): Leonardo da Vinci, *Adoration of the Magi*, 1481, oil on panel (Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence)

**Leonardo, The Virgin of the Rocks**

*by* [DR. BETH HARRIS](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory_of_Art/08%3A_Europe_1300_-_1800/8.06%3A_Italy_in_the_16th_… and [DR. STEVEN ZUCKER](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory_of_Art/08%3A_Europe_1300_-_1800/8.06%3A_Italy_in_the_16th_…*}
Video: Leonardo da Vinci, *The Virgin of the Rocks*, c. 1491-1508, oil on panel, 189.5 x 120 cm (The National Gallery, London)
There are two versions of Leonardo’s *Virgin of the Rocks* (the version in the Louvre was painted first). These two paintings are a good place to start to define the qualities of the new style of the High Renaissance. Leonardo painted both in Milan, where he had moved from Florence.

Normally when we have seen Mary and Christ (in, for example, paintings by Lippi and Giotto), Mary has been enthroned as the queen of heaven. Here, in contrast, we see Mary seated on the ground. This type of representation of Mary is referred to as the Madonna of Humility.
Figure 51: Leonardo da Vinci, *The Virgin of the Rocks*, c. 1491-1508, 189.5 x 120 cm, oil on panel, (National Gallery, London)

Mary has her right arm around the infant Saint John the Baptist who is making a gesture of prayer to the Christ child. The Christ child in turn blesses St. John. Mary’s left hand hovers protectively over the head of her son while an angel looks out and points to St. John. The figures are all located in a fabulous and mystical landscape with rivers that seem to lead nowhere and bizarre rock formations that recall the Dolomite mountains of northeastern Italy. In the foreground we see carefully observed and precisely rendered plants and flowers.
We immediately notice Mary’s ideal beauty and the graceful way in which she moves, features typical of the High Renaissance.

This is the first time that an Italian Renaissance artist has completely abandoned halos. Fra Filippo Lippi reduced the halo to a narrow ring around Mary’s head. Clearly the unreal, symbolic nature of the halo was antithetical to the realism of the Renaissance. It was, in a way, a necessary holdover from the Middle Ages: how else to indicate a figure’s divinity?

But Leonardo found another way to indicate divinity—by giving the figures ideal beauty and grace. After all, we would never mistake Leonardo’s group of figures for an ordinary picnic—the way the Lippi’s painting of the Madonna and Child with Angels almost looks like a family portrait. With Leonardo’s Virgin of the Rocks, we are clearly looking at a mystical vision of Mary, Christ, John the Baptist and an angel in heaven.

The unified composition

We can see that Leonardo grouped the figures together within a geometric shape of a pyramid (a pyramid instead of triangle because Leonardo is very concerned with creating an illusion of space—and a pyramid is three dimensional). He also has the figures gesturing and looking at each other. Both of these innovations serve to unify the composition. This is an important difference from paintings of the Early Renaissance where the figures often looked more separate from one another.
Another way to think about this is to look at the angel that Leonardo painted in this work by his teacher Verocchio. Leonardo’s angel has a more complex pose. Things that artists were just learning how to do in the Early Renaissance (like contrapposto) are now easy for the artists of the High Renaissance.
Figure \(\PageIndex{55}\): Leonardo’s angel (detail), Andrea del Verroccio and Leonardo da Vinci, *Baptism of Christ*, 1472-1475, oil on wood, 177 x 151 cm (Uffizi, Florence)

As a result, artists of the High Renaissance can do more with the body—make it more complex, more elegant and more graceful. Similarly, the compositions of the paintings of the High Renaissance are more complex and sophisticated than the compositions of the Early Renaissance—figures interact with gestures and glances, and are often interwoven and set within the shape of a pyramid.

**Additional resources:**

- [This painting at the National Gallery](#)
- [This painting at the Louvre](#)
- [Videos on Leonardo (from The National Gallery, London)](#)
  - [National Gallery page on the conservation of the painting in London](#)
  - [National Gallery video on the restoration of the painting in London](#)
  - [National Gallery video/podcast on the two versions of this painting](#)

**Leonardo, The Virgin and Child with St. Anne and St. John the Baptist (Burlington House Cartoon)**

*by BETH HARRIS and STEVEN ZUCKER*
Speakers: Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker

Jasmine Keane
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Leonardo, Last Supper

by **DR. STEVEN ZUCKER** and **DR. BETH HARRIS**
“Leonardo imagined, and has succeeded in expressing, the desire that has entered the minds of the apostles to know who is betraying their Master. So in the face of each one may be seen love, fear, indignation, or grief at not being able to understand the meaning of Christ; and this excites no less astonishment than the obstinate hatred and treachery to be seen in Judas.”

(Georgio Vasari, *Lives of the Artists*, 1568; translated by George Bull)

Subject

The subject of the *Last Supper* is Christ’s final meal with his apostles before Judas identifies Christ to the authorities who arrest him. The Last Supper (a Passover Seder) is remembered for two events:
Christ says to his apostles, “One of you will betray me,” and the apostles react, each according to his own personality. Referring to the Gospels, Leonardo depicts Philip asking, “Lord, is it I?” Christ replies, “He that dippeth his hand with me in the dish, the same shall betray me” (Matthew 26). We see Christ and Judas simultaneously reaching toward a plate that lies between them, even as Judas defensively backs away.

Leonardo also simultaneously depicts Christ blessing the bread and saying to the apostles, “Take, eat; this is my body” and blessing the wine and saying “Drink from it all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for the forgiveness of sins” (Matthew 26). These words are the founding moment of the sacrament of the Eucharist (the miraculous transformation of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ).

Figure 1: Detail, Leonardo da Vinci, Last Supper, 1498, tempera and oil on plaster (Santa Maria della Grazie, Milan)

**Apostles identified**

Leonardo’s *Last Supper* is dense with symbolic references. Attributes identify each apostle. For example, Judas Iscariot is recognized both as he reaches toward a plate beside Christ (Matthew 26) and because he clutches a purse containing his reward for identifying Christ to the authorities the following day. Peter, who sits beside Judas, holds a knife in his right hand, foreshadowing that Peter will sever the ear of a soldier as he attempts to protect Christ from arrest.
Suggestions of the heavenly

The balanced composition is anchored by an equilateral triangle formed by Christ’s body. He sits below an arching pediment that, if completed, traces a circle. These ideal geometric forms refer to the renaissance interest in Neo-Platonism (an element of the humanist revival that reconciles aspects of Greek philosophy with Christian theology). In his allegory, “The Cave,” the Ancient Greek philosopher Plato emphasized the imperfection of the earthly realm. Geometry, used by the Greeks to express heavenly perfection, has been used by Leonardo to celebrate Christ as the embodiment of heaven on earth.

Leonardo rendered a verdant landscape beyond the windows. Often interpreted as paradise, it has been suggested that this heavenly sanctuary can only be reached through Christ.

The twelve apostles are arranged as four groups of three and there are also three windows. The number three is often a reference to the Holy Trinity in Catholic art. In contrast, the number four is important in the classical tradition (e.g. Plato’s four virtues).
The Last Supper in the Early Renaissance

Andrea del Castagno’s *Last Supper* (1447) is typical of the Early Renaissance. The use of linear perspective in combination with ornate forms such as the sphinxes on the ends of the bench and the marble paneling tend to detract from the spirituality of the event. In contrast, Leonardo simplified the architecture, eliminating unnecessary and distracting details so that the architecture can instead amplify the spirituality. The window and arching pediment even suggest a halo. By crowding all of the figures together, Leonardo uses the table as a barrier to separate the spiritual realm from the viewer’s earthly world. Paradoxically, Leonardo’s emphasis on spirituality results in a painting that is more naturalistic than Castagno’s.

Backstory

During World War II, in August of 1943, the Allies launched a massive bombing campaign on Milan and its outskirts. The explosions and the ensuing fires killed over 700 people and destroyed many of the city’s most important buildings and monuments, including a significant portion of Santa Maria delle Grazie. Miraculously, the wall with the painting survived, probably because it had been shored up with sandbags and mattresses, but the roof of the refectory was blown off and the other walls were decimated. For several months, the *Last Supper* remained exposed to the elements, covered only with a tarp, until the refectory (the dining room of the monastery where the Last Supper was painted) was rebuilt and a team of restorers began working to preserve and restore the painting.

But Leonardo’s work was already in a sad state well before bombs threatened to destroy it completely. Soon after it was completed on February 9, 1498, it began to deteriorate. Because Leonardo sought greater detail and luminosity than could be achieved with traditional fresco, he covered the wall with a double layer of dried plaster. Then, borrowing from panel painting, he added an undercoat of lead white to enhance the brightness of the oil and tempera that was applied on top. This experimental technique allowed for chromatic brilliance and extraordinary precision but because the painting is on a thin exterior wall, it amplified the effects of humidity, and the paint failed to properly adhere to the wall. Mold grew between the paint and the surface, and the presence of moisture caused constant peeling. By the second half of the sixteenth century, Giovanni Paulo Lomazzo stated that “the painting is all ruined.” The first restoration efforts took place beginning in 1726, and over the centuries they were followed by several more.
Over the past five hundred years the painting’s condition has been seriously compromised by these early restoration efforts, as well as by its location (the church is in an area prone to severe flooding); the materials and techniques Leonardo used; occupation by Napoleon’s army (who stabled horses in the refectory and reportedly lobbed bricks at the apostles’ heads); humidity, dust, and air pollution; and, most recently, the cumulative effect of crowding tourists.

![Image of "The Last Supper" by Leonardo da Vinci]

After the destruction wrought by the bombing in World War II, restorers covered the painting with a thick layer of shellac (a kind of resin) in order to combat the moisture problems and keep the paint from peeling. They then began scraping away some of the layers of paint that had been applied over the years, uncovering what they believed to be Leonardo’s original brushstrokes. Finally, in 1977, the Italian government teamed with private corporations to fund a massive project to fully uncover the original painting. It took head restorer Pinin Brambilla Barcilon over twenty years to complete the effort, meticulously scraping away at the painting’s surface centimeter by centimeter with surgical tools and microscope. In 1999, when the fully restored painting—in its new, climate-controlled environment—was officially unveiled, critics around the globe argued as to whether it is now true to the original, or irrevocably deformed, as only about 42.5% of the present surface is Leonardo’s work, 17.5% is lost, and the remaining 40% was added by previous restorers. (Most of this repainting can be found in the painting’s wall hangings and ceiling).

The Last Supper is a prime example of how public and professional attitudes toward restoration efforts are not only often contentious, but change over time. Whereas in the nineteenth century and earlier, restorations focused on overpainting in order to present the illusion of a perfectly finished work, modern approaches tend to favor the exposure of missing pieces, and to make all additions visible and explicit. The current version of the Last Supper resembles little of what Leonardo created in 1498, but it makes visible the painting’s miraculous and tortured history.
Condition statistics

Number of years after its completion that deterioration was noted: 18  
Number of bombs that have hit the refectory: 1  
Number of years needed to complete the recent conservation project: 22  
Number of years that Leonardo needed to complete the painting: 4  
Number of research studies produced during conservation project: 60  
Number of hours spent on the conservation project: 50,000  
Percentage of the surface that is lost: 17.5  
Percentage of the surface painted during the seven previous restorations: 40  
Percentage of the surface that was painted by Leonardo: 42.5

Backstory by Dr. Naraelle Hohensee

Additional resources:

Ross King, Leonardo and the Last Supper (Walker & Company, 2012)

Critical assessment of the restoration from ArtWatchUK


UNESCO page for Santa Maria delle Grazie

UNESCO-sponsored video about the most recent restoration

Last Supper from Universal Leonardo

The Crucifixion and Passion of Christ in Italian Painting from The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Timeline of Art History

360-degree panorama of the refectory in Santa Maria della Grazie

Leonardo, Mona Lisa

by DR. STEVEN ZUCKER and DR. BETH HARRIS
Portraits were once rare

We live in a culture that is so saturated with images, it may be difficult to imagine a time when only the wealthiest people had their likeness captured. The wealthy merchants of Renaissance Florence could commission a portrait, but even they would likely only have a single portrait painted during their lifetime. A portrait was about more than likeness, it spoke to status and position. In addition, portraits generally took a long time to paint, and the subject would commonly have to sit for hours or days, while the artist captured their likeness.
The most recognized painting in the world

The *Mona Lisa* was originally this type of portrait, but over time its meaning has shifted and it has become an icon of the Renaissance—perhaps the most recognized painting in the world. The *Mona Lisa* is a likely a portrait of the wife of a Florentine merchant. For some reason however, the portrait was never delivered to its patron, and Leonardo kept it with him when he went to work for Francis I, the King of France.

The *Mona Lisa*’s mysterious smile has inspired many writers, singers, and painters. Here’s a passage about the *Mona Lisa*, written by the Victorian-era writer Walter Pater:
We all know the face and hands of the figure, set in its marble chair, in that circle of fantastic rocks, as in some faint light under sea. Perhaps of all ancient pictures time has chilled it least. The presence that thus rose so strangely beside the waters, is expressive of what in the ways of a thousand years men had come to desire. Hers is the head upon which all “the ends of the world are come,” and the eyelids are a little weary. It is a beauty wrought out from within upon the flesh, the deposit, little cell by cell, of strange thoughts and fantastic reveries and exquisite passions. Set it for a moment beside one of those white Greek goddesses or beautiful women of antiquity, and how would they be troubled by this beauty, into which the soul with all its maladies has passed!

 ![Figure](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory_of_Art/08%3A_Europe_1300_-_1800/8.06%3A_Italy_in_the_16th_%26_17th_century/8.06.06%20Piero%20della%20Francesca%20Portrait%20of%20Battista%20Sforza%20(1465-66)%20Galleria%20degli%20Uffizi%20Florence%20—from%20Vasari%20%281550%29%20%28public%20domain%29)

Piero della Francesca’s *Portrait of Battista Sforza* (c. 1465-66) is typical of portraits during the Early Renaissance (before Leonardo); figures were often painted in strict profile, and cut off at the bust. Often the figure was posed in front of a birds-eye view of a landscape.

**A new formula**

With Leonardo’s portrait, the face is nearly frontal, the shoulders are turned three-quarters toward the viewer,
Leonardo uses his characteristic sfumato—a smokey haziness, to soften outlines and create an atmospheric effect around the figure. When a figure is in profile, we have no real sense of who she is, and there is no sense of engagement. With the face turned toward us, however, we get a sense of the personality of the sitter.

Northern Renaissance artists such as Hans Memling (see the Portrait of a Young Man at Prayer, c. 1485-1494, left) had already created portraits of figures in positions similar to the Mona Lisa. Memling had even located them in believable spaces. Leonardo combined these Northern innovations with Italian painting’s understanding of the three dimensionality of the body and the perspectival treatment of the surrounding space.

A recent discovery

An important copy of the Mona Lisa was recently discovered in the collection of the Prado in Madrid. The background had been painted over, but when the painting was cleaned, scientific analysis revealed that the copy was likely painted by another artist who sat beside Leonardo and copied his work, brush-stroke by brush-stroke. The copy gives us an idea of what the Mona Lisa might look like if layers of yellowed varnish
were removed.

Additional resources:

This painting at the Louvre

Louvre Feature: A Closer Look at the Mona Lisa

Not Just Another Fake Mona Lisa from New York Times Interactive

Mona Lisa at Universal Leonardo

Leonardo, *The Mona Lisa*

by HENI TALKS
Martin Kemp - The Mona Lisa: Painting beyond Portraiture from HENI Talks on Vimeo.

The Mona Lisa is an extraordinary painting; so much so that the small portrait of a bourgeois Florentine woman has been the subject of many myths and conspiracy theories. But Leonardo da Vinci expert Martin Kemp is keen to emphasise the very ordinary circumstances of the portrait’s commission and the sitter’s life.

Over the course of his career, Kemp has debunked many of the myths the iconic painting has given rise to and has helped to identify the people instrumental to its creation. But he also argues that the painting became more than ‘just a small portrait’ for Leonardo: the artist poured all he knew about science and the poetry of painting into the commission. How did this work change the way artists painted portraits for centuries afterwards?

Michelangelo

Michelangelo was known as il divino, (in English, “the divine one”) and it is easy for us to see why.

About Michelangelo
Michelangelo Buonarroti—the Italian Renaissance painter, sculptor, architect, and poet—was called “Il Divino” (The Divine One) by his contemporaries because they perceived his artworks to be otherworldly. His art was in high demand, and thought to have terribilità, poorly translated as “terribleness” and better described as powerfulness. He was mythologized by followers, emulated by artists, celebrated by humanists, and patronized by a total of nine popes. As commemorations, over one hundred portraits of him were created during the sixteenth century alone, far more than any other artist at the time. Despite three biographies written about the artist during his own lifetime, we know the most about the sometimes-generous and often-humorous perfectionist through his letters. Not only do we have more primary sources on Michelangelo than any other historical artist, he is one of the most written-about artists of all time. In today’s terms, Michelangelo was a workaholic homebody whose cats missed him when he was away. He did not like to debate art, waste time, or show his work before he was ready. Despite a few mid-career collaborations, Michelangelo was careful and guarded, never running a typical workshop, locking his studio, and burning
drawings. He also complained a lot, and, at times, could be overconfident, curt, and blunt, once resulting in a punch in the nose.

**Better late than never**

Although he became an artistic superstar, Michelangelo’s start was different from most artists of his time. His initial success can be credited to his family’s connections to the powerful, noble Florentine family, the Medici. In the early 1490s, he learned carving under the tutelage of a student of Donatello, Bertoldo di Giovanni, at the Medici sculpture garden. Upon entering the workshop of the painter Domenico Ghirlandaio, Michelangelo began his official professional training at the age of thirteen, several years later than usual (and unlike typical apprentices who had to pay to study under a master, Michelangelo was paid, perhaps due to his family’s relations to the Medici or his innate talent). However, he desired to sculpt instead, stating that he drank in his love of stone carving from his wet nurse, who came from a family of simple pastoral stoncutters.[1] To emphasize this aspect of himself for the first few decades of his career, he signed his letters “Michelangelo Sculptor.” Also important to his formative years was the dissection of cadavers to learn anatomy. The challenging conditions—after hours by candlelight and without refrigeration—called to only the most dedicated artists.

![Figure 1: Michelangelo, Pietà, marble, 1498–1500 (Saint Peter's Basilica, Rome. Photo: Stanislav Traykov, CC BY 2.5)](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory_of_Art/08%3A_Europe_1300_-_1800/8.06%3A_Italy_in_the_16th_…)

At twenty-three years old, Michelangelo accepted his first large-scale public project: to carve two full-scale figures within one piece of stone, a very difficult task. St. Peter’s Pietà, commissioned for the tomb of Cardinal Bihères de Lagraulas, initiated his rise to fame. The pressure was on: the contract stated that the
sculpture was to be the most beautiful work in Rome. After six months at the quarries to find the perfect marble, Michelangelo began carving the Pietà. When the sculpture was put on display in Old St. Peter’s Basilica (before the rebuilding initiated by Pope Julius II), pilgrims questioned who had made such a beautiful work. As the story goes, the sculptor overheard a group incorrectly attribute the work to another sculptor. Michelangelo snuck back in late that night with a lantern, hammer, and chisel to carve his name on the Virgin’s sash. It is the only work he ever signed, and he later regretted this act of excessive pride.

Soon after, Michelangelo received an important commission in Florence. A figure of David was desired for up high on an outside buttress of the Duomo. He was tasked to re-use a nearly twenty-foot tall piece of marble nicknamed “The White Giant” that another artist had attempted but failed to carve forty years prior. Michelangelo stepped up to the challenge, completing the colossal statue in two years. In the end, the sculpture was placed outside the Palazzo Signoria.

The success of David led to a large-scale civic commission inside the palazzo to paint a battle scene for the Florentine government, the Battle of Cascina. This arrangement placed him in direct competition with Leonardo, who was already at work on the Battle of Anghiari on the opposite wall. While neither painting was ever finished, copies of both survive. Michelangelo’s cartoon (a full-scale preparatory drawing for the fresco), served as a sort of art school for younger artists who came to copy his figures. His drawings from this period are some of his most superbly rendered figures, with a distinct cross-hatching chiaroscuro technique. Disegno, or drawing, was considered both a manual pursuit and an intellectual endeavor and was the most important part of his practice. Sketching from the male nude was central to his art making.
In his next major fresco project, the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel commissioned by Pope Julius II, the main narrative represents nine stories of the Book of Genesis, such as the Creation of Adam. Michelangelo’s bulky, muscular figures were inspired by the ancient Laocoön, which he witnessed being unearthed in Rome in 1506. The study for the Libyan Sibyl is an exquisite preparatory drawing from this time, revealing his use of a male model for a female figure.
accents of white chalk on the left shoulder of the figure in the main study, 28.9 × 21.4 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Michelangelo began painting the ceiling with the traditional method of using cartoons to transfer the design onto the wet plaster, but he became so proficient towards the end, he worked freehand. He also claimed to work without assistants (despite evidence otherwise), and preferred to keep his work private until finished.

One story relays that he threw planks at Pope Julius II from the scaffolding, mistaking him for a spy![2]

The ceiling took Michelangelo over four years to paint. Initially, he did not want the commission, claiming that painting was not his art. He wrote a satirical poem about his personal struggle paired with a caricature of himself standing to paint: “With my beard towards heaven… I am bent like a Syrian bow….”[3]

Mid-Career but not middle of the pack

Michelangelo was initially called to Rome in 1505 to carve the tomb of Julius II intended for the center of New St. Peter's Basilica, soon to be under construction. If fully realized, the monument would have contained over forty life-size figures, impossible for Michelangelo to ever have finished. The memorial was finally erected, in a reduced form in 1545, as a wall tomb in S. Pietro in Vincoli in Rome.
The monumental *Moses*, intended for an upper corner, is now featured as the main figure. Two series of figures were never placed in the final arrangement: two bound “slaves” in the Louvre Museum in Paris and four struggling “captives” in the Accademia Museum in Florence. The *Captives*, likely carved in the 1520s, are bulky, block-like, and rough, where one can see the artist’s cross-hatching marks made with the *gradina*, a multi-toothed chisel. His preferred tool, the *cane*, a dog-toothed chisel, left distinct groove lines on the surface of the marble. Because of the roughness, these, and other sculptures, have been labeled *non-finito*, or unfinished, a topic much debated in scholarship.
Michelangelo traveled back and forth from Rome and Florence during the late 1510s and 20s. In Florence, he worked for Julius' successor, Pope Leo X de' Medici, on the façade of the family's church, San Lorenzo, which was never completed. It was here, though, where he honed his entrepreneurial skills, managing hundreds of workers under his direction. Michelangelo continued Medici employment under Pope Clement VII, designing the Laurentian Library and the New Sacristy.

In 1527, during a period of political turmoil, the Florentine Republic took back control from the Medici. Two years later, the city came under siege by troops of Holy Roman Empire and the Medici were reinstalled. Despite his longtime connections to the family, Michelangelo, a republican at heart, left Florence forever in 1534.
Late life in the Eternal City

Michelangelo’s second fresco in the Sistine Chapel in Rome, the *Last Judgment*, was commissioned by Pope Paul III and was painted between 1535 and 1541. It also functioned as a study tool for artists. Giorgio Vasari, the sixteenth-century artist and biographer, claimed that artists no longer needed to study live models from nature since every conceivable human position was represented in Michelangelo’s fresco. To accomplish this, Michelangelo positioned tiny wax models to help develop the complex, large-scale composition. Reliance on Michelangelo’s contorted figures by later artists resulted in a sense of artificiality, a prized characteristic of *Mannerism*. The artist was constantly developing new working practices. For example, in order to extend working hours, Michelangelo made a headlamp with a special wax candle so he could paint into the late hours of the night, often forgetting to eat. Long days proved dangerous though, and he took a bad fall off the scaffolding, nearly breaking his leg.

Michelangelo became a Roman citizen in 1537, and it was here that he established his legacy as an architect. During the last two decades of his long life, Michelangelo focused on architectural commissions, sculpting only for himself. His major projects included renovating the Capitoline Hill and overseeing the construction of St. Peter’s (without pay for not only the salvation of his soul but also to retain complete...
creative control). As a devout Christian, Michelangelo made pilgrimage to all of Rome's seven martyr churches during his old age. As he aged, he became more and more stubborn, riding his horse in the rain, for example. Owning horses was seen as an aristocratic endeavor, a status the artist became increasingly concerned with over the years. In his 1553 biography by Ascanio Condivi written with the artist's consultation, Michelangelo emphasized his family's nobility as a descendent of the counts of Canossa.

The artist never had children (he claimed his artworks were his children), or even proper students. Instead, he sought to groom his nephew Lionardo as the sole Buonarotti heir. Michelangelo also established many great friendships such as that with Vittoria Colonna, whom he gifted a devotional Pietà drawing. He turned to this theme for his own tomb memorial, now known as the Florentine Pietà. Michelangelo attempted to carve four figures out of one marble block, a nearly impossible task. This act was in direct competition with the famed ancient Laocoön, which, despite legend, was discovered by the artist to have been made of several pieces of stone. Here, Mary holds the dead Christ with Mary Magdalene on the left and Nicodemus behind
them, figures who each witnessed the death of Christ. Michelangelo carved his self-portrait in the face of Nicodemus, placing himself over Christ in a last wish for salvation. In the end, this image did not adorn his tomb. However, he continued to carve almost daily up until his death in 1564; an onlooker described the eighty-something year old’s blows with a hammer as incredible.

The Florentine Art Academy, founded under the leadership of Vasari a year before Michelangelo died, erected the largest funerary memorial for an artist to date, naming him the father of the arts. Artists throughout the ages—from Caravaggio to Bernini, to Reynolds to Rodin, to Picasso to Hockney—looked to the art of Michelangelo as the founder of a forceful, new figural style. Michelangelo elevated the status of the artist more than any other artist of his time. He valued artistic freedom and personal expression, making art his way. Only with this in mind, can his creative vision and legend truly be appreciated.
Figure \(\PageIndex{80}\): Michelangelo’s tomb, Basilica of Santa Croce, Florence (photo: Walwyn, CC BY-NC 2.0)

**Notes:**


2. Ibid, p. 25.


**Additional resources:**

Vasari’s *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects* in English translation at [Project Gutenberg](https://www.gutenberg.org)

Second edition of Vasari’s *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects* in Italian at [Archive.org](https://archive.org)
Virtual tour of the Sistine Chapel

Michelangelo’s design for the Tomb of Pope Julius II della Rovere at the Metropolitan Museum of Art

See more pictures of the Medici Chapel (New Sacristy)


Howard Hibbard, Michelangelo. 2nd ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1974)

Deborah Parker, Michelangelo and the Art of Letter Writing (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014)


Tamara Smithers, ed., *Michelangelo in the New Millennium* (Boston: Brill, 2016)


**Michelangelo, Pietà**

by DR. BETH HARRIS and DR. STEVEN ZUCKER
The Pietà was a popular subject among northern European artists. It means “Pity” or “Compassion,” and represents Mary sorrowfully contemplating the dead body of her son which she holds on her lap. This sculpture was commissioned by a French Cardinal living in Rome.

Look closely and see how Michelangelo made marble seem like flesh, and look at those complicated folds of drapery. It is important here to remember how sculpture is made. It was a messy, rather loud process (which is one of the reasons that Leonardo claimed that painting was superior to sculpture!). Just like painters often mixed their own paint, Michelangelo forged many of his own tools, and often participated in the quarrying of his marble — a dangerous job.

When we look at the extraordinary representation of the human body here we remember that Michelangelo, like Leonardo before him, had dissected cadavers to understand how the body worked.

Jasmine Keane
Sep 23, 2020, 9:46 AM

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Michelangelo, David

by DR. STEVEN ZUCKER and DR. BETH HARRIS
The many meanings of Michelangelo's David

by TED-ED
Media, iframe, embed and object tags are not supported inside of a PDF.

Video \([^\text{PageIndex\{11\}}\']): Video from TED-Ed. Speaker: James Earle.

**Michelangelo, Moses**

by [DR. BETH HARRIS](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory_of_Art/08%3A_Europe_1300_-_1800/8.06%3A_IItaly_in_the_16th__) and [DR. STEVEN ZUCKER](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory_of_Art/08%3A_Europe_1300_-_1800/8.06%3A_IItaly_in_the_16th__)
When Michelangelo finished sculpting *David*, it was clear that this was quite possibly the most beautiful figure ever created—exceeding the beauty even of Ancient Greek and Roman sculptures. Word of *David* reached Pope Julius II in Rome, and he asked Michelangelo to come to Rome to work for him. The first work Pope Julius II commissioned from Michelangelo was a tomb for the pope.

This may seem a bit strange to us today, but great rulers throughout history have planned fabulous tombs for themselves while they were still alive—they hoped to ensure that they would be remembered forever.
When Michelangelo began the *Tomb of Pope Julius II*, his ideas were quite ambitious. He planned a two-story structure decorated with more than 20 sculptures—each of these life sized. This was more than one person could do in a lifetime.
Pope Julius II asked Michelangelo to pause his work on the tomb to paint the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel and he was never able to complete his plan for the tomb. After experiencing trouble with Julius' heirs, Michelangelo eventually completed a much scaled-down version of the tomb, which was installed in San Pietro in Vincoli (and not in St. Peter's Basilica as planned).

Moses

Moses is an imposing figure—he is nearly eight feet high sitting down! He has enormous muscular arms and an angry, intense look in his eyes. Under his arms he carries the tablets of the law—the stones inscribed with the Ten Commandments that he has just received from God on Mt. Sinai. You might marvel at Moses' horns. This comes from a mistranslation of a Hebrew word that described Moses as having rays of light coming from his head.

Figure \(\PageIndex{83}\): Moses (detail), Michelangelo, Tomb of Pope Julius II, c. 1513-1515, marble, 235 cm (San Pietro in Vincoli, Rome)
In this story from the Old Testament book of Exodus, Moses leaves the Israelites, who he has just delivered from slavery in Egypt, to go to the top of Mt. Sinai. When he returns, he finds that the Israelites have constructed a golden calf to worship and make sacrifices to. They have, in other words, been acting like the Egyptians and worshipping a pagan idol.

One of the commandments Moses received is “Thou shalt not make any graven images,” so when Moses sees the Israelites worshipping this idol and betraying the one and only God who has just delivered them from slavery, he throws down the tablets and breaks them. Here is the passage from the Hebrew Bible:
Then Moses turned and went down the mountain. He held in his hands the two stone tablets inscribed with the terms of the covenant. They were inscribed on both sides, front and back. These stone tablets were God's work; the words on them were written by God himself. When Joshua heard the noise of the people shouting below them, he exclaimed to Moses, “It sounds as if there is a war in the camp!” But Moses replied, “No, it’s neither a cry of victory nor a cry of defeat. It is the sound of a celebration.” When they came near the camp, Moses saw the calf and the dancing. In terrible anger, he threw the stone tablets to the ground, smashing them at the foot of the mountain.

(Exodus 32: 15-19)

We can see the figure’s pent-up energy. The entire figure is charged with thought and energy. It is not entirely clear what moment of the story Michelangelo shows us. Moses sits with the tables of the ten commandments under his right arm. Is he about to rise in anger after seeing the Israelites worshiping the golden calf?

Figure 8: Michelangelo, Moses from the Tomb of Pope Julius II, c. 1513-1515, marble, 235 cm (San Pietro in Vincoli, Rome)

Moses is not simply sitting down; his left leg is pulled back to the side of his chair as though he is about to rise. And because this leg is pulled back, his hips also face left. Michelangelo, to create an interesting, energetic figure—where the forces of life are pulsing throughout the body—pulls the torso in the opposite direction. And so his torso faces to his right. And because the torso faces to the right, Moses turns his head to the left, and then pulls his beard to the right.

Michelangelo managed to create an intense, energetic figure even though Moses is seated. While the marble itself is still, it seems as though his beard is moving and flowing and that his muscular arms and torso are about to shift.
In comparing Michelangelo’s **Moses** to an Early Renaissance sculpture by Donatello, it is easy to see the difference between the Early and High Renaissance ideals. Donatello’s relaxed figure **St. John** really lacks the power and life of Michelangelo’s sculpture. Think about how you’re sitting right now at the computer. Perhaps your legs are crossed, as mine are as I write this. What about if you were not at the computer? And what to do with the hands? You can see that this could be a rather uninteresting position. Yet Michelangelo has given the entire figure energy and movement, even in a sitting position.

In Michelangelo’s dynamic figure of **Moses** we have a clear sense of the prophet and his duty to fulfill God’s wishes. **Moses** is not a passive figure from the distant biblical past, but a living, breathing, present figure that reflects the will and might of God.

**Additional resources:**

[Another drawing for the Tomb of Pope Julius II in the British Museum](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory_of_Art/08%3A_Europe_1300_-_1800/8.06%3A_Italy_in_the_16th_…)

[Another drawing for the Tomb of Pope Julius II in The Metropolitan Museum of Art](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory_of_Art/08%3A_Europe_1300_-_1800/8.06%3A_Italy_in_the_16th_…)

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Figure \(\PageIndex{86}\): Donatello, **St. John**, c. 1408-15, marble (Museo dell’Opera del Duomo, Florence)
Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:
Michelangelo, *Slaves*

by [DR. BETH HARRIS](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory_of_Art/08%3A_Europe_1300_-_1800/8.06%3A_Italy_in_the_16th_...) and [DR. STEVEN ZUCKER](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory_of_Art/08%3A_Europe_1300_-_1800/8.06%3A_Italy_in_the_16th_...)
Video \(\PageIndex{13}\): Michelangelo, *Slaves* (commonly referred to as the *Dying Slave* and the *Rebellious Slave*), 1513-15, marble, 2.09 m high, (Musée du Louvre, Paris)

Usually considered unfinished, these sculptures were originally intended for the tomb of Pope Julius II. According to the Louvre, the artist gave the marbles to Roberto Strozzi who presented them to the King of France.
Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:
Quarrying and carving marble

by BETH HARRIS and DR. DAVID DROGIN

Video: Michelangelo, *The Awakening Slave* (unfinished), c. 1530, marble, 263 cm high (Accademia di Belle Arti, Florence)
Carving marble with traditional tools

by THE J. PAUL GETTY MUSEUM

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Video \{\textsc{PageIndex\{15\}}\}: Video from the J. Paul Getty Museum.

Watch a sculptor demonstrate the use of traditional tools—such as the tooth chisel, the point chisel, the drill, and the rasp—as he creates a finished figure from a block of marble.

Ceiling of the Sistine Chapel

by CHRISTINE ZAPPELLA
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Video \(\PageIndex{16}\): Michelangelo, Ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, 1508-12, fresco (Vatican, Rome)
To any visitor of Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel, two features become immediately and undeniably apparent: 1) the ceiling is really high up, and 2) there are a lot of paintings up there. Because of this, the centuries have handed down to us an image of Michelangelo lying on his back, wiping sweat and plaster from his eyes as he toiled away year after year, suspended hundreds of feet in the air, begrudgingly completing a commission that he never wanted to accept in the first place.

Fortunately for Michelangelo, this is probably not true. But that does nothing to lessen the fact that the frescoes, which take up the entirety of the vault, are among the most important paintings in the world.
Michelangelo began to work on the frescoes for Pope Julius II in 1508, replacing a blue ceiling dotted with stars. Originally, the pope asked Michelangelo to paint the ceiling with a geometric ornament, and place the twelve apostles in spandrels around the decoration. Michelangelo proposed instead to paint the Old Testament scenes now found on the vault, divided by the fictive architecture that he uses to organize the composition.

The subject of the frescoes

The narrative begins at the altar and is divided into three sections. In the first three paintings, Michelangelo tells the story of The Creation of the Heavens and Earth; this is followed by The Creation of Adam and Eve and the Expulsion from the Garden of Eden; finally is the story of Noah and the Great Flood.

Ignudi, or nude youths, sit in fictive architecture around these frescoes, and they are accompanied by prophets and sibyls (ancient seers who, according to tradition, foretold the coming of Christ) in the spandrels.

In the four corners of the room, in the pendentives, one finds scenes depicting the Salvation of Israel.
Although the most famous of these frescoes is without a doubt, *The Creation of Adam*, reproductions of which have become ubiquitous in modern culture for its dramatic positioning of the two monumental figures reaching towards each other, not all of the frescoes are painted in this style. In fact, the first frescoes Michelangelo painted contain multiple figures, much smaller in size, engaged in complex narratives. This can best be exemplified by his painting of *The Deluge*. 

![The Deluge](image)
In this fresco, Michelangelo has used the physical space of the water and the sky to separate four distinct parts of the narrative. On the right side of the painting, a cluster of people seeks sanctuary from the rain under a makeshift shelter. On the left, even more people climb up the side of a mountain to escape the rising water. Centrally, a small boat is about to capsize because of the unending downpour. And in the background, a team of men work on building the arc—the only hope of salvation.

Up close, this painting confronts the viewer with the desperation of those about to perish in the flood and makes one question God’s justice in wiping out the entire population of the earth, save Noah and his family, because of the sins of the wicked. Unfortunately, from the floor of the chapel, the use of small, tightly grouped figures undermines the emotional content and makes the story harder to follow.
A shift in style

In 1510, Michelangelo took a yearlong break from painting the Sistine Chapel. The frescoes painted after this break are characteristically different from the ones he painted before it, and are emblematic of what we think of when we envision the Sistine Chapel paintings. These are the paintings, like *The Creation of Adam*, where the narratives have been pared down to only the essential figures depicted on a monumental scale. Because of these changes, Michelangelo is able to convey a strong sense of emotionality that can be perceived from the floor of the chapel. Indeed, the imposing figure of God in the three frescoes illustrating the separation of darkness from light and the creation of the heavens and the earth radiates power throughout his body, and his dramatic gesticulations help to tell the story of Genesis without the addition of extraneous detail.

The Sibyls

![Figure](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory_of_Art/08%3A_Europe_1300_-_1800/8.06%3A_Italy_in_the_16th_…)

This new monumentality can also be felt in the figures of the sibyls and prophets in the spandrels surrounding the vault, which some believe are all based on the *Belvedere Torso*, an ancient sculpture that was then, and remains, in the Vatican’s collection. One of the most celebrated of these figures is the *Delphic Sibyl* (left).
The overall circular composition of the body, which echoes the contours of her fictive architectural setting, adds to the sense of the sculptural weight of the figure.

Her arms are powerful, the heft of her body imposing, and both her left elbow and knee come into the viewer’s space. At the same time, Michelangelo imbued the Delphic Sibyl with grace and harmony of proportion, and her watchful expression, as well as the position of the left arm and right hand, is reminiscent of the artist’s *David*.

*The Libyan Sibyl* (left) is also exemplary. Although she is in a contorted position that would be nearly impossible for an actual person to hold, Michelangelo nonetheless executes her with a *sprezzatura* (a deceptive ease) that will become typical of the Mannerists who closely modelled their work on his.
Figure \(\PageIndex{100}\): Heraclitus, whose features are based on Michelangelo's and his seated pose is based on the prophets and sibyls from Michelangelo's frescoes on the Sistine Chapel Ceiling (detail), Raphael, *School of Athens*, 1509-11, Stanza della Segnatura (Vatican City, Rome)

It is no wonder that Raphael, struck by the genius of the Sistine Chapel, rushed back to his *School of Athens* in the Vatican Stanze and inserted Michelangelo's weighty, monumental likeness sitting at the bottom of the steps of the school.

**Legacy**

Michelangelo completed the Sistine Chapel in 1512. Its importance in the history of art cannot be overstated. It turned into a veritable academy for young painters, a position that was cemented when Michelangelo returned to the chapel twenty years later to execute the Last Judgment fresco on the altar wall.

The chapel recently underwent a controversial cleaning, which has once again brought to light Michelangelo's jewel-like palette, his mastery of chiaroscuro, and additional iconological details which continue to captivate modern viewers even five hundred years after the frescoes' original completion. Not bad for an artist who insisted he was not a painter.

1. The diagram neglects the subject of the four corner paintings indicated in lavender. The four scenes represent the salvation of the Jewish people.
Michelangelo, Studies for the *Libyan Sibyl* (recto); Studies for the *Libyan Sibyl* and a small *Sketch for a Seated Figure* (verso)

by *THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART*

This is the most magnificent drawing by Michelangelo in the United States. A male studio assistant posed for the anatomical study, which was preparatory for the Libyan Sibyl, one of the female seers frescoed on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel (Vatican Palace) in 1508-12. In the fresco, the figure is clothed except for her powerful shoulders and arms, and has an elaborately braided coiffure. Michelangelo used the present sheet to explore the elements that were crucial in the elegant resolution of the figure’s pose, especially the counterpoint twist of shoulders and hips and the manner of weight-bearing on her toe. Recent research shows that this sheet of studies was owned by the Buonarroti family soon after Michelangelo’s death. The “no. 21” inscribed on the verso of the sheet (at lower center) fits precisely into a numerical sequence found
on many other drawings by the artist that have this early Buonarroti family provenance.

Michelangelo, *Last Judgment, Sistine Chapel*

*by DR. ESPERANÇA CAMARA*

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“*He will come to judge the living and the dead*”

*(from the Apostle’s Creed, an early statement of Christian belief)*

This is it. The moment all Christians await with both hope and dread. This is the end of time, the beginning of eternity when the mortal becomes immortal, when the elect join Christ in his heavenly kingdom and the damned are cast into the unending torments of hell. What a daunting task: to visualize the endgame of earthly existence – and furthermore, to do so in the Sistine Chapel, the private chapel of the papal court, where the leaders of the Church gathered to celebrate feast day liturgies, where the pope’s body was laid in state before his funeral, and where—to this day—the College of Cardinals meets to elect the next pope.

No artist in sixteenth-century Italy was better positioned for this task than Michelangelo, whose completion of the chapel’s ceiling in 1512 had sealed his reputation as the greatest master of the human figure—especially the male nude. Pope Paul III was well aware of this when he charged Michelangelo with repainting the...
chapel's altar wall with the Last Judgment. With its focus on the resurrection of the body, this was the perfect subject for Michelangelo.

**Historical & pictorial contexts**

![Figure 102: Titian, Portrait of Pope Paul III, c. 1543, oil on canvas, 113.3 x 88.8 cm (Museo di Capodimonte, Naples)](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory_of_Art/08%3A_Europe_1300_-_1800/8.06%3A_Italy_in_the_16th_…)

The *Last Judgment* was one of the first art works Paul III commissioned upon his election to the papacy in 1534. The church he inherited was in crisis; the Sack of Rome (1527) was still a recent memory. Paul sought to address not only the many abuses that had sparked the Protestant Reformation, but also to affirm the legitimacy of the Catholic Church and the orthodoxy of its doctrines (including the institution of the papacy).

The visual arts would play a key role in his agenda, beginning with the message he directed to his inner circle by commissioning the Last Judgment.

The decorative program of the Sistine Chapel encapsulates the history of salvation. It begins with God’s creation of the world and his covenant with the people of Israel (represented in the Old Testament scenes on the ceiling and south wall), and continues with the earthly life of Christ (on the north wall). The addition of the Last Judgment completed the narrative. The papal court, representatives of the earthly church, participated in this narrative; it filled the gap between Christ’s life and his Second Coming.
The composition

Michelangelo’s *Last Judgment* is among the most powerful renditions of this moment in the history of Christian art. Over 300 muscular figures, in an infinite variety of dynamic poses, fill the wall to its edges. Unlike the scenes on the walls and the ceiling, the *Last Judgment* is not bound by a painted border. It is all encompassing and expands beyond the viewer’s field of vision. Unlike other sacred narratives, which portray events of the past, this one implicates the viewer. It has yet to happen and when it does, the viewer will be among those whose fate is determined.

Figure \(\PageIndex{102}\): Michelangelo, *Last Judgment*, Sistine Chapel, altar wall, fresco, 1534-1541 (Vatican City, Rome)

Despite the density of figures, the composition is clearly organized into tiers and quadrants, with subgroups and meaningful pairings that facilitate the fresco’s legibility. As a whole, it rises on the left and descends on the right, recalling the scales used for the weighing of souls in many depictions of the Last Judgment.
Christ is the fulcrum of this complex composition. A powerful, muscular figure, he steps forward in a twisting gesture that sets in motion the final sorting of souls (the damned on his left, and the blessed on his right). Nestled under his raised arm is the Virgin Mary. Michelangelo changed her pose from one of open-armed pleading on humanity’s behalf seen in a preparatory drawing, to one of acquiescence to Christ’s judgment.
The time for intercession is over. Judgment has been passed.

Directly below Christ a group of wingless angels (left), their cheeks puffed with effort, sound the trumpets that call the dead to rise, while two others hold open the books recording the deeds of the resurrected. The angel with the book of the damned emphatically angles its down to show the damned that their fate is justly based on their misdeeds.

**The elect (those going to heaven)**

On the lower left of the composition (Christ’s right), the dead emerge from their graves, shedding their burial shrouds. Some rise up effortlessly, drawn by a invisible force, while others are assisted by herculean angels, one of whom lifts a pair of souls that cling to a strand of rosary beads. This detail reaffirms a doctrine contested by the Protestants: that prayer and good works, and not just faith and divine grace, play a role in determining one’s fate in the afterlife. Directly below, a risen body is caught in violent tug of war, pulled on one end by two angels and on the other by a horned demon who has escaped through a crevice in the central mound. This breach in the earth provides a glimpse of the fires of hell.

Figure 105: The dead rise from their graves and float to heaven, some assisted by angels. In the upper right, a couple is pulled to heaven on rosary beads, and just below that a risen body is caught in violent tug of war (detail), Michelangelo, *Last Judgment*, Sistine Chapel, altar wall, fresco, 1534-1541 (Vatican City, Rome) fresco, 1534-1541 (Vatican City, Rome)
The damned (those going to hell)

Figure \(\PageIndex{106}\): Demons drag the damned to hell, while angels beat down those who struggle to escape their fate (detail), Michelangelo, *Last Judgment*, Sistine Chapel, altar wall, fresco, 1534-1541 (Vatican City, Rome)

On the right of the composition (Christ’s left), demons drag the damned to hell, while angels beat down those who struggle to escape their fate (image above). One soul is both pummeled by an angel and dragged by a demon, head first; a money bag and two keys dangles from his chest. His is the sin of avarice. Another soul—exemplifying the sin of pride—dares to fight back, arrogantly contesting divine judgment, while a third (at the far right) is pulled by his scrotum (his sin was lust). These sins were specifically singled out in sermons delivered to the papal court.

Figure \(\PageIndex{107}\): Charon drives the damned onto hell’s shores and in the lower right corner stands the ass-eared Minos (detail), Michelangelo, *Last Judgment*, Sistine Chapel, altar wall, fresco, 1534-1541 (Vatican City, Rome)

In the lower right corner, Charon—the ferryman from Greek mythology who transports souls to the underworld—swings his oar as he drives the damned onto hell’s shores (image above). In the lower right corner stands another mythological character, the ass-eared Minos, his own carnal sinfulness indicated by the snake that bites his genitals. He stands at the very edge of hell, judging the new-comers to determine their eternal punishment.
While such details were meant to provoke terror in the viewer, Michelangelo’s painting is primarily about the triumph of Christ. The realm of heaven dominates. The elect encircle Christ; they loom large in the foreground and extend far into the depth of the painting, dissolving the boundary of the picture plane. Some hold the instruments of their martyrdom: Andrew the X-shaped cross, Lawrence the gridiron, St. Sebastian a bundle of arrows, to name only a few.

Especially prominent are St. John Baptist and St. Peter who flank Christ to the left and right and share his massive proportions (above). John, the last prophet, is identifiable by the camel pelt that covers his groin and dangles behind his legs; and, Peter, the first pope, is identified by the keys he returns to Christ. His role as the keeper of the keys to the kingdom of heaven has ended. This gesture was a vivid reminder to the pope that his reign as Christ’s vicar was temporary—in the end, he too will to answer to Christ.

In the lunettes (semi-circular spaces) at the top right and left, angels display the instruments of Christ’s Passion, thus connecting this triumphal moment to Christ’s sacrificial death. This portion of the wall projects one foot forward, making it visible to the priest at the altar below as he commemorates Christ’s sacrifice in the liturgy of the Eucharist.

Figure \(\PageIndex{108}\): Left: St. John the Baptist; right: St. Peter (detail), Michelangelo, *Last Judgment*, altar wall, Sistine Chapel, fresco, 1534-1541 (Vatican City, Rome)
Critical response: masterpiece or scandal?

Shortly after its unveiling in 1541, the Roman agent of Cardinal Gonzaga of Mantua reported: “The work is of such beauty that your excellency can imagine that there is no lack of those who condemn it. . . . [T]o my mind it is a work unlike any other to be seen anywhere.” Many praised the work as a masterpiece. They saw Michelangelo’s distinct figural style, with its complex poses, extreme foreshortening, and powerful (some might say excessive) musculature, as worthy of both the subject matter and the location. The sheer physicality of these muscular nudes affirmed the Catholic doctrine of bodily resurrection (that on the day of judgment, the dead would rise in their bodies, not as incorporeal souls).

Others were scandalized—above all by the nudity—despite its theological accuracy, for the resurrected would enter heaven not clothed but nude, as created by God. Critics also objected to the contorted poses (some resulting in the indecorous presentation of buttocks), the breaks with pictorial tradition (the beardless Christ, the wingless angels), and the appearance of mythology (the figures of Charon and Minos) in a scene portraying sacred history. Critics saw these embellishments as distractions from the fresco’s spiritual message. They accused Michelangelo of caring more about showing off his creative abilities than portraying sacred truth with clarity and decorum. Religious art was the “book of the illiterate” and as such should be easy to understand.
Michelangelo’s *Last Judgment*, however, was not painted for an unlearned, lay audience. To the contrary, it was designed for a very specific, elite and erudite audience. This audience would understand and appreciate his figural style and iconographic innovations. They would recognize, for example, that his inclusion of Charon and Minos was inspired by Dante’s *Inferno*, a text Michelangelo greatly admired. They would see in the youthful face of Christ his reference to the *Apollo Belvedere*, an ancient Greek Hellenistic sculpture in the papal collection lauded for its ideal beauty. Thus, Michelangelo glosses the identity of Christ as the “Sun of Righteousness” (Malachi 4:2).
Even more poignant is Michelangelo’s insertion of himself into the fresco. His is the face on the flayed skin held by St. Bartholomew, an empty shell that hangs precariously between heaven and hell. To his learned audience, the flayed skin would bring to mind not only the circumstances of the saint’s martyrdom but also the flaying of Marsyas by Apollo. In his foolish arrogance, Marsyas challenged Apollo to a musical contest, believing his skill could surpass that of the god of music himself. His punishment for such hubris was to be flayed alive. That Michelangelo should identify with Marsyas is not surprising. His contemporaries had
dubbed him the “divine” Michelangelo for his ability to rival God himself in giving form to the ideal body. Often he lamented his youthful pride, which had led him to focus on the beauty of art rather than the salvation of his soul. So, here, in a work done in his mid sixties, he acknowledges his sin and expresses his hope that Christ, unlike Apollo, will have mercy upon him and welcome him into the company of the elect.

An epic painting

Like Dante in his great epic poem, *The Divine Comedy*, Michelangelo sought to create an epic painting, worthy of the grandeur of the moment. He used metaphor and allusion to ornament his subject. His educated audience would delight in his visual and literary references.

Originally intended for a restricted audience, reproductive engravings of the fresco quickly spread it far and wide, placing it at the center of lively debates on the merits and abuses of religious art. While some hailed it as the pinnacle of artistic accomplishment, others deemed it the epitome of all that could go wrong with religious art and called for its destruction. In the end, a compromise was reached. Shortly after the artist’s death in 1564, Daniele Da Volterra was hired to cover bare buttocks and groins with bits of drapery and repaint Saint Catherine of Alexandria, originally portrayed unclothed, and St. Blaise, who hovered menacingly over her with his steel combs.

![Figure 112](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory_of_Art/08%3A_Europe_1300_-_1800/8.06%3A_Italy_in_the_16th_…)

In contrast to its limited audience in the sixteenth century, now the *Last Judgment* is see by thousands of tourists daily. However, during papal conclaves it becomes once again a powerful reminder to the College of Cardinals of their place in the story of salvation, as they gather to elect Christ’s earthly vicar (the next Pope)—the person who will be responsible for shepherding the faithful into the community of the elect.
Additional resources:

The Last Judgment from the Vatican Museums

Michelangelo’s Last Judgment—uncensored

Video series on the Reformation and Counter-Reformation


**Michelangelo, Medici Chapel (New Sacristy)**

by [DR. BETH HARRIS](mailto:dr.beth.harris@berkeley.edu) and [DR. STEVEN ZUCKER](mailto:dr.steven.zucker@berkeley.edu)

Video \(\PageIndex{19}\): Michelangelo, Medici Chapel (New Sacristy), 1519-34, San Lorenzo, Florence
Michelangelo, Laurentian Library

by DR. STEVEN ZUCKER and DR. BETH HARRIS

Video \(\PageIndex{20}\): Michelangelo, Laurentian Library (vestibule and reading room), begun 1524, opened 1571, San Lorenzo, Florence

Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:

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Raphael

Raphael, an introduction

by DR. HEATHER GRAHAM
Raffaello Sanzio, better known simply as Raphael, enjoyed a meteoric career. An impeccable professional artist and a consummate courtier, Raphael was famed both for his artistic skill and his charismatic personality. From his beginnings as a local painter in his native Marche and later Florence, Raphael skyrocketed to fame in Rome, ultimately becoming the city’s most sought-after artist. Raphael’s untimely death at the age of 37 (in 1520) while at the height of his visual powers only solidified the legend of his extraordinary talent.

His visual accomplishments range from paintings of all sizes and drawings in chalk and ink—some intended to be translated to print—to elaborate fresco cycles, tapestry designs, and architecture. He was shrewd and meticulous, and his work is notable for its elegance and poise, for the ease with which he translated nature into idealized artifice. How does one paint divine grace or the very concept of philosophy? Raphael did such things with apparent ease. He embodied the ideal of sprezzatura (the appearance of nonchalant effortlessness in his creative process), a notion popularized by Raphael’s good friend, Baldassare Castiglione, in his Book of the Courtier (1528).
How do we know about him?

“For in truth we have from him art, colouring, and invention harmonized and brought to such a pitch of perfection as could scarcely be hoped for; nor may any intellect ever think to surpass him. And in addition to this benefit that he conferred on art, like a true friend to her, as long as he lived he never ceased to show how one could deal with great men, with those of middle station, and with the lowest.”

Giorgio Vasari, Lives of the Painters, Sculptors and Architects [1]

Information about Raphael’s life comes from relatively few surviving contemporary documents that refer to him, and two biographies written in the sixteenth century. Paolo Giovio, who knew Raphael personally, wrote an essay on the artist’s life shortly after his death in 1520. In 1550, Giorgio Vasari wrote an extended biography of Raphael for his Lives of the Artists, published in 1550 (expanded in 1568). Despite Raphael’s very public career, we have scant evidence of his personal life, private correspondence, and other writings to reveal the man behind the public persona.

Early career

Raphael was born in Urbino into the circle of one of the most sophisticated and intellectually oriented courts in Italy. Following the tradition of family craft, Raphael was initially trained by his father, Giovanni Sanzio, who was court painter to the ruling Montefeltro family and ran a thriving workshop. Vasari tells us that Raphael was sent by his father to continue his training under Pietro Perugino, presumably because the
precocious youth had learned all he could at home. Perugino was a leading artist in both Florence and his native Perugia and his influence on Raphael’s early paintings is unmistakable. Recent scholarship however, suggests that Raphael’s associations with Perugino came a bit later, his early training continuing in the family workshop even after his father’s death in 1494.

Figure \(\PageIndex{117}\): Left: Perugino, *Marriage of the Virgin*, 1500–1504, oil on wood, 234 x 185 cm (Musée des Beaux-Arts, Caen); right: Raphael, *Marriage of the Virgin*, 1504, oil on panel, 174 × 121 cm / 69 × 48″ (Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan)

An altarpiece depicting the *Marriage of the Virgin* (1504) shows Raphael’s indebtedness to Perugino’s approach as well as his departure from the master’s style. A comparison with a contemporaneous work on the same subject by Perugino is telling. The compositions are similar, with ready parallels evident between the placement of figures and the use of architecture. Yet Raphael’s space is more pronounced, his architecture more monumental, and his figures are imbued with a greater vitality. The younger man created a work that simultaneously met and surpassed the expectations of a market shaped by the older master. This ability to synthesize from and innovate upon the visual sources that he encountered—from his contemporaries or from the ancient world—was a definitive aspect of Raphael’s career.
In 1504, at the age of twenty-one, Raphael arrived in Florence. There, the young artist found a flourishing art market. He was able to gaze upon the powerfully expressive works of the early Florentine renaissance, and also encountered first-hand the work of local artists, including that of Leonardo da Vinci, whose influence is evident in several of Raphael’s Florentine paintings. The two portraits below recall Leonardo’s *Mona Lisa*.
In Florence, Raphael’s commissions were primarily for smaller, private paintings, such as the *Madonna of the Meadow* (1505) or his dual portraits of Agnolo and Maddalena Doni (1506). Local commissions for large-scale altarpieces—more desirable projects both for the higher prices they commanded and the public exposure they brought—eluded Raphael during these years. He did, however, continue to fulfil more prestigious projects for patrons outside of Florence, including in Siena, Urbino, and Perugia.

Raphael’s 1507 altarpiece for the Perugian widow, Atalanta Baglioni, is among the most groundbreaking works of his early career. The central panel depicting the *Entombment of Christ* is characterized by a forceful dynamism: figures’ bodies move and strain with tension created by strongly opposing diagonal lines. Raphael rejected the mood of quiet contemplation that usually characterizes altarpiece imagery in favor of energetic fervor. This daring departure from the altarpiece tradition anticipates the artist’s innovative work soon to come in Rome.
Raphael in Rome

Having never completed a large-scale project in Florence, Raphael left for Rome in 1508. He was drawn to the Eternal City by the powerful Warrior Pope, Julius II, who was in the process of re-vitalizing Rome. Julius was an astute patron. He recognized the potential of art and architecture to give material form to his vision for Rome as a new center of the Christian empire—one that would rival antiquity.
Raphael was initially one of a number of artists hired by Julius to decorate his personal suite of rooms in the Vatican palace, a semi-public space where the pope’s interests were to be materialized in art. The first room he painted, the Stanza della Segnatura (Stanza means “room” in Italian), so perfectly aligned with Julius’s vision that the entire suite was given over to him. The two frescos known as the School of Athens and Disputà (1509–1510) on the opposing largest walls of the Stanza represent Philosophy and Theology respectively. Raphael infused non-narrative scenes with dramatic force. His figures engage in active dialogue and interact emotionally—no artist before him had presented immaterial concepts with such ingenuity.

Figure 1: Raphael, Galatea, c. 1513, fresco, Villa Farnesina, Rome, 9 feet 8 inches x 7 feet 5 inches

Raphael’s success in the papal suites lead to a flourishing Roman career informed by all he saw there. He studied with equal attentiveness the art and architecture of antiquity and the Roman work of his contemporaries, including Michelangelo, who was working on the Sistine Chapel ceiling while Raphael was undertaking the frescoes in the papal suites. Raphael worked for merchants and bankers, for popes and mighty statesmen.
His enormous output included the spectacular mythological fresco cycle for the Roman pleasure villa of Agostino Chigi (the Villa Farnesina) and an elaborate series of tapestry designs on the life of St. Peter for the Sistine Chapel. He designed numerous buildings, such as the sumptuous Villa Madama (1518) just north of the Vatican, and was named lead architect of the new St. Peter’s in 1516. Partnering with the Bolognese engraver, Marcantonio Raimondi, Raphael provided drawings to be circulated as prints enabling his visual inventions to reach the widest possible audience. Religious or secular, private or public, Raphael’s work seamlessly reflected his synthesis of visual naturalism and classical idealism.

**Working method**

Raphael worked well with others. He ran a large and complex workshop comprised of skilled collaborators
who enabled him to realize numerous projects simultaneously. A shrewd manager and skilled teacher, Raphael provided highly detailed preliminary drawings for projects that could then be realized by his extensive and trusted workshop all under his meticulous eye. Raphael knew how to delegate to his team, capitalizing upon the strengths of those who worked for him.

Figure \(\PageIndex{126}\): Raphael, Transfiguration, 1518–1520, tempera on wood, 405 x 278 cm (Pinacoteca Vaticana, Vatican City)

**Gone too soon**

On April 6, 1520—Good Friday that year—Raphael died. While Vasari attributes his early demise to an excess of amorous pursuits, the artist likely succumbed to sudden illness. The shock of his death reverberated throughout Rome. His corpse lay in state in his studio under his final finished work, the *Transfiguration*, before being interred in no less an exalted site than the Pantheon. His workshop and many projects underway passed into the capable hands of his assistants, Gianfrancesco Penni and Giulio Romano, who continued his legacy and fostered further the cult of Raphaelism. His death was universally understood as marking the end of an era. As lamented by his friend, Castiglione:
you rouse the envy of the gods above and death is outraged that you can return the breath of life to things long dead, and that what the long day had gradually effaced, this you were preparing anew, spurning mortal law. Thus you fall, alas! [1]

Notes:


Additional resources:

Read more about The Book of the Courtier at the British Library


Roger Jones and Nichols Penny, Raphael (New Haven: Yale UP, 1987)

Claudia la Malfa, Raphael and the Antique (London: Reaktion Books, 2020)


**Raphael, Marriage of the Virgin**

by [DR. BETH HARRIS](#) and [DR. STEVEN ZUCKER](#)

Video ![PageIndex{21}]: Raphael, *Marriage of the Virgin*, 1504, oil on panel, 174 × 121 cm / 69 × 48”

(Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan)

**Raphael, Madonna of the Goldfinch**

by [DR. STEVEN ZUCKER](#) and [DR. BETH HARRIS](#)
Raphael, *La belle jardinière (Madonna and Child with Saint John the Baptist)*

by [DR. BETH HARRIS](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory_of_Art/08%3A_Europe_1300_-_1800/8.06%3A_Italy_in_the_16th__) and [DR. STEVEN ZUCKER](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory_of_Art/08%3A_Europe_1300_-_1800/8.06%3A_Italy_in_the_16th__)
Video \(\PageIndex{23}\): Raphael, *La belle jardinière (Madonna and Child with Saint John the Baptist)*, 1507, oil on panel, 48 × 31½" / 122 × 80 cm (Musée du Louvre, Paris)
Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:
Raphael, *School of Athens*

by DR. STEVEN ZUCKER and DR. BETH HARRIS
Media, iframe, embed and object tags are not supported inside of a PDF.
Raphael, *The Alba Madonna*

by DR. BETH HARRIS and DR. STEVEN ZUCKER
Video \(\PageIndex{25}\): Raphael, *The Alba Madonna*, c. 1510, oil on panel transferred to canvas (National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.)

**Raphael, Portrait of Pope Julius II**

by **BETH HARRIS** and **STEVEN ZUCKER**
Video \(\PageIndex{26}\): Raphael, *Portrait of Pope Julius II*, 1511, oil on poplar, 108.7 x 81 cm (National Gallery, London)

Speakers: Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker

**Raphael, Galatea**

by **DR. STEVEN ZUCKER** and **DR. BETH HARRIS**
Video \(\PageIndex{27}\)): Raphael, *Galatea*, c. 1513, fresco, Villa Farnesina, Rome, 9 feet 8 inches x 7 feet 5 inches

**Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:**

![Image of Galatea fresco](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory_of_Art/08%3A_Europe_1300_-_1800/8.06%3A_Italy_in_the_16th_...)

https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory_of_Art/08%3A_Europe_1300_-_1800/8.06%3A_Italy_in_the_16th_...
Raphael, *Pope Leo X*

by CHRISTINE ZAPPELLA

Figure \(\PageIndex{130}\): Raphael, *Portrait of Pope Leo X with Cardinals Giulio de’Medici and Luigi de’Rossi*, c. 1518, oil on panel, 119.5 x 155.5 cm (Uffizi Gallery, Florence)
No hint of chaos

Pope Leo X, son of Lorenzo de’ Medici, is best known for his wasteful habits, lecherous activities, and hedonistic quote, “Since God has given us the papacy, let us enjoy it.” But, judging from his portrayal in Raphael’s 1518 Portrait of Leo X with Cardinals Giulio de’ Medici and Luigi de’ Rossi, one would never guess that Leo’s policies were ripping Christendom apart and would directly lead to the Protestant Reformation. Rather, Leo and his two illegitimate relatives—on the left, his nephew Giulio de’ Medici (later Pope Clement VII, who was responsible for the disastrous 1527 Sack of Rome) and on the right, his cousin Cardinal Luigi de’ Rossi—are presented as dignified, stalwart men, giving no hint of the chaos into which they were throwing Italy and the entire Christian world.

Figure \(\PageIndex{131}\): Detail, Raphael, Portrait of Pope Leo X with Cardinals Giulio de’Medici and Luigi de’Rossi, c. 1518 (Uffizi Gallery, Florence)

Leo, Giulio and Luigi

The painting is dominated by Leo, whose corpulent body and sumptuous dress are the only indications of the pope’s penchant for excess. He looks off into the distance, beyond the edge of the painting, and holds a magnifying glass while turning the page of his Bible. This gives the impression that he is reacting to someone who has just entered the room. The poses of both other men indicate their relationships with Leo. Giulio stands on the left of the painting, looking out to the other direction; his posture and gaze mirror Leo’s. Giulio was considered a man of great authority, and was called by a Vatican chronicler, “Leo’s other self.” Luigi de’ Rossi, the pope’s cousin and best friend, is the only person who looks at the viewer, and his hands are touching the pope’s chair. The two had been raised together, and Leo was said to have been devastated after Luigi’s 1519 death of gout (an affliction that habitually plagued the Medici). The painting is dominated by red paint, the color of the papacy.
Although the composition of Raphael’s painting has been considered revolutionary, it actually has several precedents, such as Sebastiano del Piombo’s 1516 *Cardinal Bandinello Sauli, His Secretary, and Two Geographers*. But because this painting is so different from other portraits by Raphael, such as his Portrait of
Julius II, and because infrared x-rays of the work show that Raphael originally conceived the composition to show only Leo, like Julius, in front of a green background, many people have wondered what to make of this very odd portrait.

Significantly, the painting was sent to Florence from Rome. This has led many people to believe that the portrait was made for the wedding of his nephew, which Leo knew he could not attend. That way, the three Medici relatives could still be “present” at the event. However, the men are shown in their winter clothes, indicating that Raphael painted it a long time before the wedding; it is unlikely that Leo knew he would not be able to attend that far in advance. More importantly, Luigi de’ Rossi was at the wedding, further evidence that although the painting was set up at the event, it was probably originally intended for other purposes.

Some art historians have interpreted it as a dynastic portrait. Leo was the first Medici to attain the papacy, one of the most important offices in the entire world, and he quickly elevated his family members to high ranks within the Vatican. The Bible shown with Leo has been identified as a copy of the Hamilton Bible owned by Leo’s father, Lorenzo the Magnificent, indicating his Medici lineage. The bell on the table is a symbol of power, as it was used to summon servants, and is covered with Medici insignia, such as feathers, diamonds, and the Medici palle, or “balls,” which were the most recognizable symbols of the family. Some have suggested that the globe on Leo’s chair is also meant to recall the palle.

Most convincing is the suggestion that the portrait was made for religious purposes. In 1517, Martin Luther posted his 95 Theses condemning the abuses of the church, among which were the selling of indulgences, which Leo had used to fund the construction of Saint Peter’s Basilica. Although Luther would not split from the church for many years, the threat to the church was palpable. Art historians have noted that Leo is turning the page of his Bible from the last passage of the Book of Luke to the first of the Book of John. In Luke, Jesus is exhorting the Apostles to pray often in the Temple. This has been interpreted as a direct rebuke to Luther’s opposition to the building of Saint Peter’s Basilica. The Book of John begins, “There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came for testimony, to bear witness to the light, that all might believe through him.” Since Leo’s birth name was Giovanni (the Italian version of “John”), this scriptural passage can be understood to assert that it is only through the obedience to the pope, Giovanni...
de’ Medici, and official Vatican doctrines that one can achieve salvation. This is in direct contrast to Luther’s belief that salvation could be achieved through faith in God alone.

Overall, Raphael’s portrait has been lauded as a masterful piece of realism. The unflattering likeness of Leo, along with intricate details, such as the reflection of the interior of the room on the metal surface of the ball on the chair, show a complete mastery of the art of painting and a conception of naturalism entirely in keeping with the goals of the High Renaissance. It is ironic that modern viewers can look at Raphael’s painting, meant to glorify the Medici and the authority of the pope, as a portrait of two of the worst popes in history: Leo X saw the Christian church cleaved in half, and Clement VII hid in safety as the city of Rome was destroyed around him.

**Donato Bramante**

**Donato Bramante, Tempietto, Rome**

*by DR. STEVEN ZUCKER and DR. BETH HARRIS*
Video \PageIndex{28}(): Donato Bramante, Tempietto, c. 1502, San Pietro in Montorio, Rome

Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:
Video \(\PageIndex{29}\): Saint Peter’s Basilica (Basilica Sancti Petri), begun 1506, completed 1626, Vatican City

Architects and designers included: Donato Bramante (whose design won Julius II’s competition); Antonio da Sangallo, a student of Bramante (the Pauline Chapel); Fra Giocondo (strengthening of the foundation); Raphael and Fra Giocondo (whose redesigned building plan was not executed); Michelangelo (design of the dome, crossing, and exterior excluding the nave and facade); Giacomo della Porta (design of the cupola); Carlo Maderno (extension of Michelangelo’s plan, adding a nave and grand facade); Gian Lorenzo Bernini (addition of the piazza, the Cathedra Petri, and the Baldacchino).
Pope Julius II commissioned Bramante to build a new basilica—this involved demolishing the Old St Peter’s Basilica that had been erected by Constantine in the fourth century. This ancient church was in disrepair. But tearing it down was a bold maneuver that gives us a sense of the enormous ambition of Pope Julius II, both for the papacy as well as for himself.

Burial site of St. Peter

The site is a very holy one—it is (according to the Church) the site of the burial of St. Peter. Bramante did the first plan for the new church. He proposed an enormous centrally planned church in the shape of a Greek...
cross enclosed within a square with an enormous dome over the center, and smaller domes and half-domes radiating out. When Bramante died, Raphael took over as chief architect for St. Peter’s, and when Raphael died, Michelangelo took over. Both Michelangelo and Raphael made substantial changes to Bramante’s original plan. Nevertheless, the experience of being inside St. Peter’s is awe-inspiring.

Figure \(\PageIndex{139}\): Bramante, plan for St. Peter’s Basilica, 1506

Figure \(\PageIndex{140}\): Raphael, plan for St. Peter’s Basilica, 1513
The two basic types of Church are the basilica and the central plan. The basilica, with its long axis that focuses attention on the altar, has been the most popular type of church plan because of its practicality.
The other popular type of church plan is a central plan that is usually based either on the shape of a circle, or on a Greek cross (a cross with equal arms). These are called central plans because the measurements are all equidistant from a center. This type of Church, influenced by Classical architecture (think of the Pantheon), was very popular among High Renaissance architects. Besides the influence of ancient Roman architecture, the circle had spiritual associations. The circle, which has no beginning and no end, symbolized the perfection and eternal nature of God. For some thinkers in antiquity and the Renaissance the universe itself was constructed in the form of concentric circles with the sun, moon and stars moving in circular orbits around the earth.

Bramante’s original design was for a central plan, however—as built—the church combines elements of a central plan with the longer nave of a basilica.

**Architectural contributors to St. Peter’s Basilica include:**

- Donato Bramante, whose design won Julius II’s competition
- Antonio da Sangallo, a student of Bramante, who designed the Pauline Chapel
- Fra Giocondo, who strengthened the foundation
- Raphael worked with Fra Giocondo, whose redesigned building plan was not executed
- Michelangelo designed the dome, crossing, and exterior excluding the nave and facade
- Giacomo della Porta designed the cupola
- Carlo Maderno, extended Michelangelo’s plan adding a nave and grand facade
- Gian Lorenzo Bernini added the piazza, the Cathedra Petri, and the Baldacchino

**Additional resources:**

- [Designing St. Peter’s from Columbia University](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory_of_Art/08%3A_Europe_1300_-_1800/8.06%3A_Italy_in_the_16th_…)
- [Vatican tour of the necropolis believed to contain the tomb of Saint Peter](#) – Please note: to reach the interactive tour of the necropolis, proceed beyond the introduction and the brief lecture offered by Cardinal Comastri
- [St. Peter’s Basilica at Sacred Destinations](#)
- [Google Satellite image](#)
Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:
Figure (PageIndex{143})): More Smarthistory images...

Mannerism

Jacopo Pontormo, *Entombment (or Deposition from the Cross)*

by DR. STEVEN ZUCKER and DR. BETH HARRIS
Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:
Parmigianino

Parmigianino, *Madonna of the Long Neck*

by DR. STEVEN ZUCKER and DR. BETH HARRIS

Video: Parmigianino, *Madonna of the Long Neck*, 1530-33, 28 3/4 x 23 1/2" (73 x 60) (Uffizi, Florence)

Parmigianino, *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*

by DR. BETH HARRIS and DR. STEVEN ZUCKER
Media, iframe, embed and object tags are not supported inside of a PDF.
Rosso Fiorentino, *The Dead Christ with Angels*

by DR. STEVEN ZUCKER and DR. BETH HARRIS
Video \(\PageIndex{33}\): Rosso Fiorentino, *The Dead Christ with Angels*, c. 1524-7, oil on panel, 133.4 x 104.1 cm (52-1/2 x 41 inches) (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)

**Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:**

![Image of Rosso Fiorentino's *The Dead Christ with Angels*]

![Image of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston]

https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/Smarthistory_of_Art/08%3A_Europe_1300_-_1800/8.06%3A_Italy_in_the_16th_...
Figure \(\PageIndex{146}\): More Smarthistory images...

**Bronzino**

**Bronzino, An Allegory with Venus and Cupid**

by [DR. BETH HARRIS](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory_of_Art/08%3A_Europe_1300_-_1800/8.06%3A_Italy_in_the_16th_...) and [DR. STEVEN ZUCKER](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory_of_Art/08%3A_Europe_1300_-_1800/8.06%3A_Italy_in_the_16th_...)
This passage by Vasari is most likely related to this canvas:

And he painted a picture of singular beauty that was sent to King Francis in France, wherein was a nude Venus, with a Cupid who was kissing her, and Pleasure on one side with Play and other Loves, and on the other side Fraud and Jealousy and other passions of love.


*Bronzino, Portrait of Eleonora di Toledo with her son Giovanni*

by DR. STEVEN ZUCKER and DR. BETH HARRIS
VideoPageIndex(35)): Bronzino, *Portrait of Eleonora di Toledo with her son Giovanni*, 1544-1545, oil on panel, 115 x 96 cm (Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence)

**Bronzino and the Mannerist Portrait**

by DR. DAVID DROGIN and DR. BETH HARRIS
Sofonisba Anguissola

by DR. LAUREN KILROY-EWBANK

Sofonisba Anguissola, *Self-Portrait*, c. 1556, varnished watercolor on parchment, 8.3 x 6.4 cm (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston). The medallion is inscribed in Latin: “The maiden Sofonisba Anguissola, depicted by her own hand, from a mirror, at Cremona.”

Figure \(\PageIndex{148}\): Sofonisba Anguissola, *Self-Portrait*, c. 1556, varnished watercolor on parchment, 8.3 x 6.4 cm (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston). The medallion is inscribed in Latin: “The maiden Sofonisba Anguissola, depicted by her own hand, from a mirror, at Cremona.”

The 16th-century painter and author of *Lives of the Artists*, Giorgio Vasari, praised the work of Sofonisba Anguissola. Vasari wrote that Sofonisba,

> has laboured at the difficulties of design with greater study and better grace than any other woman of our time, and she has not only succeeded in drawing, colouring, and copying from nature, and in making excellent copies of works by other hands, but has also executed by herself alone some very choice and beautiful works of painting.”[1]

Sofonisba Anguissola was an artist who came from a noble family in Cremona (northern Italy). She is well known for the paintings she made of herself and her family (she was the oldest of seven children). In 1559, she became a lady-in-waiting to the Queen of Spain, Elisabeth de Valois, and continued to produce works while at the court of King Philip II until 1573. Interestingly, Sofonisba painted at least twelve self-portraits at a time when this was not a particularly common subject for artists (in the next century, Rembrandt would be the first artist to make the self-portrait a major part of his oeuvre).
Women in Renaissance Italy were generally barred from becoming apprentices to master artists (the standard way in which artists were trained during the Renaissance). Female artists tended to come from families where a father (or sometimes a brother) was an artist. In this way they could receive training and bypass the apprenticeship system. Sofonisba is atypical in this respect—her father was not an artist. Instead, she studied with other artists—with Bernardino Campi as well as Bernardino Gatti (Il Sojaro)—who exposed Anguissola to the fundamentals of painting, such as the importance of *disegno* (drawing or design).

We have a letter from the artist’s father dated 7 May 1557 thanking the great Italian Renaissance painter, sculptor, and architect, Michelangelo, for the “honourable and thoughtful affection that you have shown to Sofonisba, my daughter, to whom you introduced to practice the most honourable art of painting.”[2] While it is clear from this note that Sofonisba met the famous Renaissance artist, it has also been suggested that she may have even studied with Michelangelo. Certainly the renown she gained in Italy helped to secure her position as lady-in-waiting at the Spanish court.

Sofonisba’s international renown grew throughout her lifetime. Later in her life, the great Baroque painter Anthony van Dyck visited her in Sicily and painted her portrait (above). Centuries later, with the feminist movement of the 1970s, Sofonisba’s fame and significance have been once again “rediscovered” and she is now counted among ranks of other important painters of the early modern period, a revival of interest similar...
to that accorded to artists such as Artemisia Genitleschi.

Self-Portrait, 1556

In the 1556 self-portrait (above), Sofonisba shows herself in the act of painting, applying mixed pigments to a canvas that depicts the Virgin and Christ Child tenderly kissing. She gazes outward—as if we have just interrupted her in mid-stroke. Her expression is calm and reserved. A maulstick (a common device used to support the artist’s hand) held in her left hand supports her right hand as she touches the brush to the canvas.
The artist wears a simple black dress—possibly to connote modesty and virtue. Her simple fashion embodies the woman of court, as outlined by Baldassare Castiglione in his *Book of the Courtier* (1528):

> I wish this [Court] Lady to have knowledge of letters, music, painting, and to know how to dance and make merry; accompanying the other precepts that have been taught the Courtier with discreet modesty and with the giving of a good impression of herself. And thus, in her talk, her laughter, her play, her jesting, in short, in everything, she will be very graceful, and will entertain appropriately, and with witticisms and pleasantry befitting her, everyone who shall come before her. [3]

Some of Sofonisba’s other self-portraits, such as one where she holds a small book (left), even include inscriptions like “Sophonisba Anguissola virgo seipsam fecit 1554” (The virgin Sofonisba Anguissola made this herself in 1554) to identify herself as a chaste, virtuous woman.

The inclusion of a painting of the Virgin Mary and Christ child in the 1556 self-portrait further reflects on Sofonisba’s virginity. While Mary feeding, kissing, or embracing Christ as a child were common subjects of this era, it is likely that Sofonisba incorporated this intimate scene between mother and son here to fashion
herself as a virtuous woman—one who identifies with the ultimate virtuous woman, the Virgin Mary.

Figure \(\PageIndex{152}\): Catharina van Hemessen, *Self-Portrait at the Easel*, 1548, oil on panel, 32.2 x 25.2 cm (Kunstmuseum, Basel)

Displaying herself in the act of painting associated her with an established tradition of artists depicting themselves—not all of them men. While contemporaneous artists like Titian and Albrecht Dürer painted self-portraits, those that included a painter’s tools of the trade—a canvas, palette, and maulstick—were less common. Examples do exist, however, from the sixteenth century, and artists showing themselves with their tools became increasingly popular over time. Like Sofonisba, Caterina van Hemessen fashions herself at a canvas, holding a maulstick while she paints. A *self-portrait by the Dutch artist Joachim Wtewael* also shows the artist holding his painter’s tools, most likely applying paint to a canvas outside the picture plane.

**Other Portraits**

Beyond painting self-portraits, Sofonisba also produced miniatures and group portraits. Many of those completed before her departure for Spain, such as *The Chess Game*, exhibit members of her family. Sofonisba would not have had access to male models, and drew inspiration from those people she encountered in her daily life like her family.
This painting shows the artist’s three sisters (Lucia, Europa, and Minerva) playing chess—an intellectual pursuit—with their governess looking over them. Sofonisba shows an intimate setting with her sisters. The sister to the left, thought to be Lucia, looks out at the viewer after winning the game. Sofonisba displays her virtuosity as a painter here by positioning her figures in a variety of poses. Their gazes also lead our eye around the canvas and eventually back to the artist herself, who occupies the position outside of the canvas. Sofonisba also demonstrates her skill by painting a variety of textures in her sisters’ clothes and the imported carpet under the chessboard.
Sofonisba continued painting portraits throughout her life, including self-portraits of her in advanced age. One, dated to 1610 (left, when the artist was 78) shows the artist seated on a chair, holding a book and a piece of paper. Her dress is not altogether different from the outfit in her 1556 painting: black, modest, and reserved. Upon her death at age 93 (in 1625), her second husband, Orazio Lomellino, had her tomb inscribed, “To Sofonisba, my wife, who is recorded among the illustrious women of the world, outstanding in portraying the images of man.”

Notes


Additional resources:

[Sofonisba Anguissola by Alan Farber](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory_of_Art/08%3A_Europe_1300_-_1800/8.06%3A_Italy_in_the_16th_...
Woman’s Capacity to Create: The Unusual Case of Sofonisba Anguissola

Benvenuto Cellini, *Perseus with the Head of Medusa*

by **DR. BETH HARRIS** and **DR. DAVID DROGIN**

Media, iframe, embed and object tags are not supported inside of a PDF.

Video \(\PageIndex{37}\): Benvenuto Cellini, *Perseus with the Head of Medusa*, c. 1554, bronze (Loggia dei Lanzi, Piazza della Signoria, Florence)

Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:
One of the most recognized works by one of the least well-known artists

Giambologna’s *Abduction of a Sabine Woman* is one of the most recognized works of sixteenth-century Italian art by one of the least well-known artists of the period. And while Giambologna may not be a household name like Michelangelo, his influence on late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century European art was extensive and long lasting. The *Abduction of a Sabine Woman* is located in a spot few tourists
miss—the Loggia dei Lanzi, just outside of the Palazzo Vecchio, in Florence.

Figure 157: Giambologna, *Mercury*, c. 1586, bronze, 72 cm high (Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden)

The story of how Giambologna came to create the *Sabine* sculpture is almost as interesting as the historical tale it represents. Giambologna (born Jean du Boulogne in Douai in Flanders), arrived in Florence sometime around 1552, and within a few short years was court sculptor to the Medici and running his own large and productive workshop. Giambologna was highly regarded for his small to mid-size works in marble and bronze which were collected by connoisseurs and sent as Medicean diplomatic gifts all across Europe.

**Giambologna and Mannerism**

Giambologna’s works exemplified the characteristics of the Mannerist period, a time in which artists exploited the idea of beauty for beauty’s sake in works that showcased their artistic talent with figures composed of sinuous lines, graceful curves, exaggerated poses, and a hyper-elegance and preciousness that delighted
viewers. His figure of *Mercury* (above) is an example of what made his work so popular.

While Giambologna’s fame and workshop flourished, there was one area in which he was not active, and that was in monumental sculpture. And in Florence, just taking the short walk from the Cathedral to the Palazzo Vecchio becomes a demonstration of the long history of life-size or larger public sculpture that dominated the cityscape. There were marble sculptures by such famous fifteenth-century sculptors as Donatello, Nanni di Banco, and Lorenzo Ghiberti on the façade of the cathedral, in the niches on the campanile (the belltower), and encircling the exterior of Orsanmichele, and in the Piazza della Signoria—the center of Florentine life and politics—were the truly monumental sculptures, including Michelangelo’s *David* (1504), Baccio Bandinelli’s *Hercules and Cacus* (1525-32), and Bartolommeo Ammanati’s *Neptune Fountain* (1565).

![Abduction of a Sabine Woman](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory_of_Art/08%3A_Europe_1300_-_1800/8.06%3A_Italy_in_the_16th_%26_17th_Centuries/8.06.05%3A_Giambologna_and_his_Sculpture/figure-158)

Figure 158: Giambologna, *Abduction of a Sabine Woman*, 1581-83, marble, 410 cm high (Loggia dei Lanzi, Florence)

**A sculptor of monumental works too**

Thus, Giambologna also wanted to prove himself as a sculptor of monumental works. And as the story is told, Giambologna undertook the Sabine project without any specific subject in mind with the only goal being to produce a complex multi-figural group.[1] When the work was nearly complete and placed in the Loggia dei Lanzi in August of 1582, it was referred to simply as “group of three statues,” as no one knew what the subject was.[2] However, just a short time later, the work was interpreted as representing an ancient Roman event, and Giambologna produced a bronze narrative relief to be inserted into the base of the sculpture to help clarify the content of the three figures above.[3]
The subject

The subject is a dramatic one from ancient Roman history. According to the accounts of both Livy and Plutarch, after the city of Rome was founded in 750 B.C.E., the male population of the city was in need of women to ensure both the success of the city and the propagation of Roman lineage. After failed negotiations with the neighboring town of Sabine for their women, the Roman men devised a scheme to abduct the Sabine women (which they did during a summer festival).

What we see in Giambologna’s sculpture is the moment when a Roman successfully captures a Sabine woman as he marches over a Sabine male who crouches down in defeat. (As a note, the sculpture is also...
referred to as the *Rape of a Sabine Woman*, which can lead to confusion over the subject. In Latin, the word *rapito* means “abduction” (and in Italian, the verb *rapire* means “to abduct,” thus the title *Abduction of a Sabine Woman* is technically more correct than the *Rape of a Sabine Woman*, which has explicit connotations of sexual violence. And indeed, in Livy’s account of the episode, he claims there was not sexual violence, rather a variety of enticements by the Roman for how the women would be treated as their wives.)([4])

**A triumph**

The *Sabine* was indeed a triumph for Giambologna. According to one account, when the work was officially unveiled to the Florentine public, not one person could find fault with it.[5] And if we compare the *Sabine* with another multi-figure group, such as Bandinelli’s two-figure *Hercules and Cacus*, it is immediately apparent how Giambologna dramatically altered the conception of a sculpture involving more than two figures. Bandinelli’s Hercules stands over a defeated Cacus, both men trapped in stony stillness. Neither figure expresses emotion or seems to possess the potential for movement.

![Image](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory_of_Art/08%3A_Europe_1300_-_1800/8.06%3A_Italy_in_the_16th__…)

In contrast, Giambologna built his figures up from the bottom, beginning with the cowering Sabine male (above), whose body twists and contorts in reaction to what is happening above him. The man’s straining muscles are evident as he raising his left hand up in despair as the triumphant Roman literally straddles his body, as he strides forward, carrying the Sabine woman away. If you look closely where he grabs her left hip, his fingers actually press into her flesh (below), thus amplifying the effect of these figures being more than marble statues. The woman herself, arms outstretched, twists back and over the Roman’s shoulder as she is hoisted into the air. These figures convey movement, aggression, fear, and struggle, as they move upward in
a flame-like or twisting pattern known as *figura serpentinata* (serpentine figure), popular with Mannerist artists of the period. And to enhance the sense of frenetic energy, Giambologna did not provide a single or primary viewpoint for the work so the viewer must engage with the sculpture in 360 degrees in order to see the entirety of the drama unfold.

![Abduction of a Sabine Woman](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/SmartHistory_of_Art/08%3A_Europe_1300_-_1800/8.06%3A_Italy_in_the_16th__17th_century/8.06.11%3A_Giambologna/fig161.jpg)

Figure 161: Giambologna, *Abduction of a Sabine Woman*, 1581-83, marble, 410 cm high (Loggia dei Lanzi, Florence)

The *Abduction of the Sabine Woman* proved to be Giambologna’s entrée into the Florentine world of monumental sculpture. From this point forward he went on to create numerous other works that occupy principal sites in Florence, including the *Cosimo I de’Medici Equestrian Monument* in the Piazza della Signoria, *St. Luke* for a niche at Orsanmichele, and a brilliant *Hercules Battling the Centaur*, which is situated just a few feet from his Sabine group in the Loggia dei Lanzi.
The influence of what Giambologna accomplished with the Sabine group was seen through the next several decades. For example, in Gianlorenzo Bernini’s *Aeneas, Anchises, and Ascanius* we can most certainly begin to see the influence of Giambologna on the man who would become the face of Baroque sculpture in Italy. In Bernini’s *Pluto and Proserpina*, the forward stride of Pluto, the elevation of Proserpina above his head, his fingers pressing into the flesh of her thigh, and her outstretched arms and anguished face all point directly to the influence of Giambologna’s Sabine group. And it wasn’t only other sculptors who were responsive to Giambologna’s sculpture. Painters such as Nicolas Poussin and Pietro da Cortona both executed paintings of the same subject and clearly borrowed from both Giambologna’s *Sabine* figural group, but also his bronze narrative relief as well.


[3] Ibid.


Additional resources:

Bronze sculpture in the Renaissance on the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

Mannerism: Bronzino and his Contemporaries on the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

Giambologna at the Google Cultural Institute

Smarthistory images for teaching and learning: