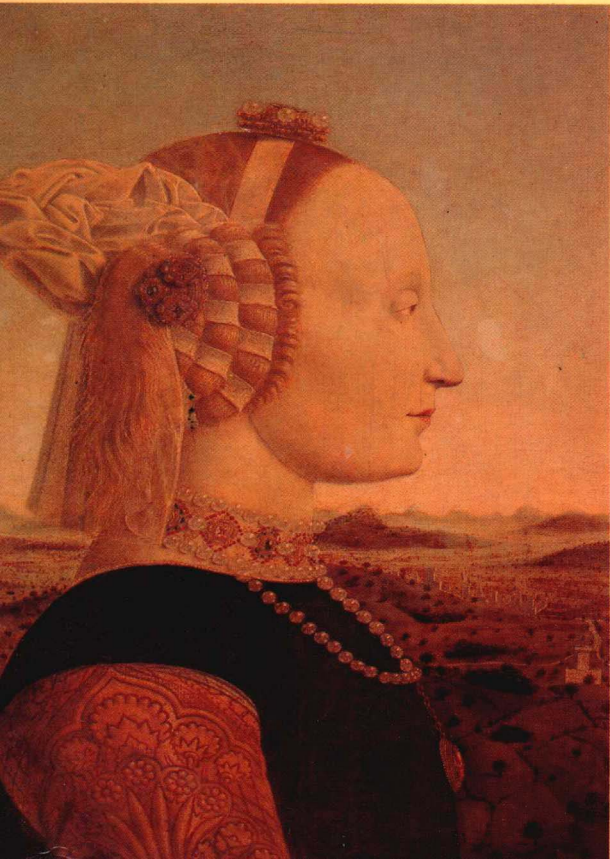


Cambridge Introduction to the History of Art

The Renaissance

ROSA MARIA LETTS



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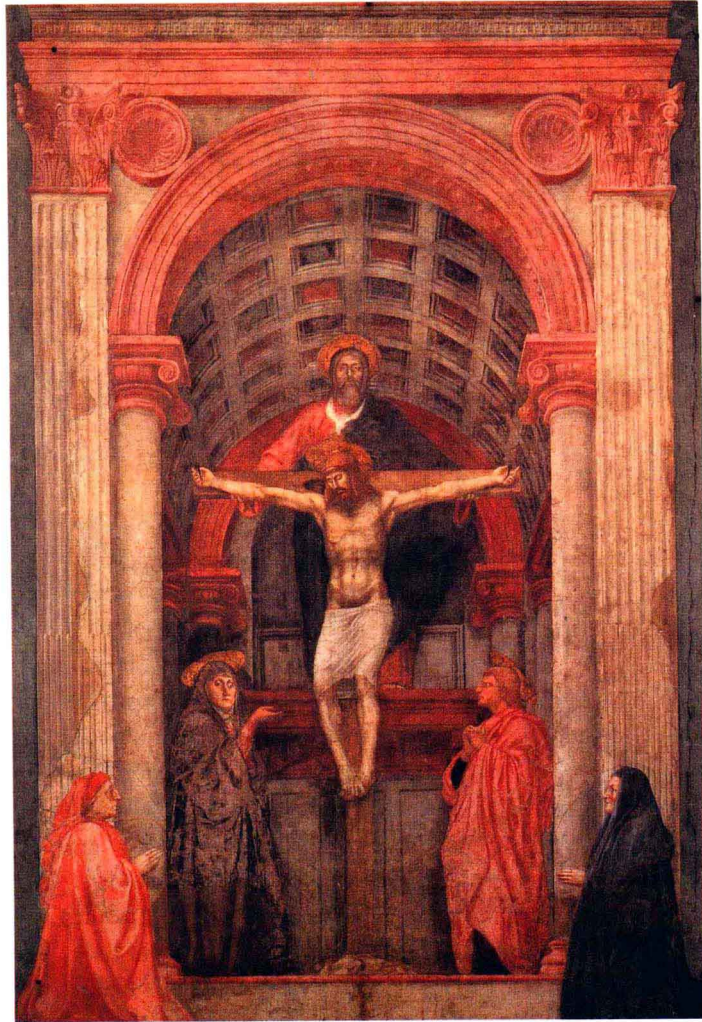
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The interpreter of reality

Tommaso di Giovanni called Masaccio, *The Holy Trinity with the Virgin, St John and donors*, c. 1425-7, fresco, 667 × 317 cm, Santa Maria Novella, Florence.



'He recognised that Painting is but the imitation of things as they are',
Vasari on Masaccio in
*The Lives of the Painters,
Sculptors and Architects.*

The Florentines of the parish of Santa Maria Novella must have gazed with astonishment at the unveiling of the fresco of the Trinity painted by Masaccio about 1427 on the wall of their church. It seemed as if someone had knocked a hole in the wall and built a niche in it. Within the niche a divine event was taking place while two of their own number, the donors, knelt in devout silence as if astonished to find themselves in such a Presence.

In Vasari's *The Lives of the Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, written 130 years after Masaccio painted *The Trinity*, the bewilderment of the people of Florence confronted by such a new artistic 'language' still echoes. Whether this reflects the true reaction of Masaccio's contemporaries or simply the writer's own feelings, it is clear that Vasari was certain that it was the start of a new style. He introduced part two of *The Lives* as follows: 'Masaccio adopted a new manner for his heads, his draperies, buildings and nudes, his colours and foreshortenings. He thus brought into existence the modern style . . . the first of the painters to improve drawing . . . we shall see how greatly he was responsible for the rebirth of painting.'

The argument by art historians over whether the Renaissance (the word means rebirth) started a new artistic style, or gave final and more complete form to existing tendencies will never end. Nor is it all that relevant to the true appreciation of the individual works of art. Form in art is generally the outward expression of an idea. A certain consistency of forms and their treatment enables us to recognise a style. By looking at the outward expressions, whether paintings, sculptures or buildings, in the light of the ideas they contain, we may come to our own opinion as to whether novelty or continuity typifies the art of the Renaissance.

For instance, let us compare two panels both representing the Virgin and Child enthroned. The first is by Gentile da Fabriano, the great Italian exponent of the style now known as International Gothic, a style which had spread throughout Europe in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The second is by Masaccio. Gentile's work was made about 1408, Masaccio's about 1426.

In the first, angels at the feet of the Virgin hold a musical scroll and sing. The Virgin sits in a leafy alcove; the Child holds a pomegranate. From the quick staccato 'rhythm' of the angels and greenery and the smaller creatures that are here symbolic of humanity, Gentile leads us into the solemn 'andante' of the divine figures. Mother and Child rise like a vision elegantly and flatly outlined against the gold ground that symbolises their spiritual dwelling. The figures taper in subtle harmony with the shape of the frame.

Gentile's representation appeals first and foremost to our sense of line, colour, pattern, to our pure sense of beauty. But, great as it is,



above

Gentile da Fabriano,
*Virgin and Child
Enthroned*, c. 1408, wood
panel, 115 × 64 cm,
National Gallery, Perugia.

above right

Masaccio, *Madonna and
Child*, c. 1426, wood,
135.5 × 73 cm, central
panel of polyptych,
National Gallery, London.

the picture does not even start to challenge our awareness of the physical presence of the Mother and Child. The Virgin of Gentile is an image from another world, an image for us to worship from afar in faith.

Let us now look at Masaccio's Virgin enthroned, where an altogether different musical event is taking place. Two angels sitting at the feet of the throne are playing their lutes. The one on the right, having just struck a chord, seems to be, as Vasari says, 'inclining his ear very attentively to listen to the music he is making'. The angels' size, even though on a smaller scale than that of the Virgin and Child, is one with which we can personally associate. In this they are unlike the minute angels of Gentile. And now we look up to the plain, motherly features of Mary, comfortably holding the baby in her lap. He is sucking a grape held in one hand while the other is squashing the bunch in his mother's palm. The grapes, like the pomegranate in the first picture, are symbolic of the coming suffer-

ing of Christ. The Virgin's sad gaze reveals her awareness of his inescapable future. But despite the mystical effect of this knowledge, Masaccio has described the pair in as realistic a manner as possible. The baby's uncertain attempt to find his mouth, the chubby legs and feet suspended in mid air, the warmth of feeling in the whole scene, bring the divine characters down to our human plane. We can identify with some of their feelings, with the distress of Mary, the serene cosiness of baby and angels.

Masaccio makes this possible by creating a feeling of real space all round the throne, starting with the first plane of the painting where a raised step seems to go right round to accommodate the little players. The careful use of the light shining from above on the receding planes of the steps, convinces us of the depth and dimensions. The scene is inviting.

In Masaccio's *Trinity* the invitation is even more open. The Virgin looks at us, pointing to the cross; the steps in the foreground are cut away; unfinished they suggest a continuation of space. From all this we deduce that a new attitude was growing up at that time between artist and public. The spectator is now invited to be part of the reality portrayed, to identify with the characters and the story enacted. Masaccio convinces the onlooker by masterly naturalism, by concentrating all elements of the picture into one overall theme, one demonstrable truth. The spectators, astonished and moved, like the donors at the feet of *The Trinity*, live the unfolding of a mystery: the mystery of the real world around them.

Naturalism is certainly developed in Masaccio's art as never before. But if we consider the imitation of nature to be the main characteristic of his art, we would merely imply that Masaccio continued to paint in the Gothic style. Interest in details and in the individual objects, in truth to nature and the painstaking rendering of it, all these things did not start with the Renaissance. Indeed, the naturalism of the early Renaissance can be seen simply as the continuation of a Gothic tendency.

The Gothic artist, for centuries already, had devoted himself to the careful rendering of things in faithful imitation of God's creation. This naturalism in painting and sculpture increased during the fourteenth century, becoming the distinguishing feature of the Late Gothic period, especially in northern Europe. There, the

people's natural tendency to careful observation thrived in the descriptive accuracy of their art.

But the naturalism of the Gothic artist did not aim at convincing the onlooker of the reality of the object or the event described. It did almost the opposite by placing things against artificial, even illogical, backgrounds, or with things which could never coexist in real life. A beautiful lady might sit in a garden stroking a unicorn, an animal which does not exist, or with wild animals happily snuggling at her feet. The symbolic value of many of these elements would go a long way to explain their presence in the picture, while their abundance and exoticism shows us the imaginative power of the Gothic world. It was a world where fantasy was at times the sublimation of a religious attitude, but more often a refuge from a grim reality. The medieval belief that man was too limited to understand or deserve the fruits of God's creation, was an added deterrent to facing the world as it really was.

The Renaissance artist, on the other hand, was the interpreter of a changed attitude of mind. To him man was not so much the humble observer of God's greatness as the proud expression of God himself, his natural heir on earth. Nature was not there to be gazed at and copied, but to be examined and understood; not to be feared, but to be mastered. The artist was still an observer of nature, but the work of art had become a study of nature in which the artist arranged all the parts logically into one organised comprehensible whole.

Tracing this change of attitude will lead us to the heart of the movement that we call the Renaissance. A change in thinking led to a change in artistic expression and that change is the new element in Renaissance art. Similarly, tracing those elements in Renaissance art which were continued from the Gothic tradition, will also lead us to the roots of the Renaissance by explaining its derivation.

Meanwhile let us note that around the beginning of the fifteenth century certain European artists began to show a new preoccupation with the world around them, wishing to interpret it as part of a teaching process to be shared with the public. These artists were by no means the majority, nor necessarily the leading ones. In Florence Brunelleschi, Donatello and Masaccio were at least second in the popular opinion to Ghiberti, Gentile da Fabriano and Lorenzo Monaco; in Flanders Hubert van Eyck did not enjoy the patronage

that the Limbourg brothers did. But they were the heralds of a new relation between man and reality. The emergence of their interest in things as they are, their struggle to express the new found truths, is the story of the Renaissance.

I Origins of Renaissance art

THE REDISCOVERY OF CLASSICAL CULTURE

The period in European history known as the Renaissance, roughly the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, was a time of great changes. It fixed the outlines of much of the world we know today. The kingdoms of Europe grew into strong states; there were changes in religion, in ideas and in behaviour. These, as we have said, were reflected in the work of great artists, especially in Italy. But the changes came slowly and drew upon many various sources.

The main change, which became the basis of Renaissance thought, was a new awareness of man himself as 'centre and measure of all things'. It came into existence in slow and continuous stages all through the fourteenth century through the rediscovery of the literature of the ancient world by the poets, philosophers and humanists.

Renaissance people studied especially the literature of Greece and Rome and found there an appreciation of nature and of physical valour. This led to a new esteem for man and nature which, as Christians, they regarded as God's creation.

Of course, these ancient, or classical, writings had never been entirely lost. For centuries the libraries of the monasteries had copied and stored books by Cicero, Virgil, Aristotle. But their collections were incomplete and often imperfectly understood. Gradually more manuscripts came to light and scholars outside the monasteries began to take a deeper interest.

PETRARCH AND HUMANISM

Francesco Petrarca was one such scholar. He was born in 1304 and studied law at Bologna. But he took little interest in the legal profession, preferring to spend his time reading and writing poetry both in Latin and in the Italian language. On his return to Avignon

where his family had lived since it was banished from Florence in the fourteenth century a suitable occupation was found for him as secretary to Cardinal Colonna, a Roman aristocrat attached to the papal court, then also at Avignon in the south of France.

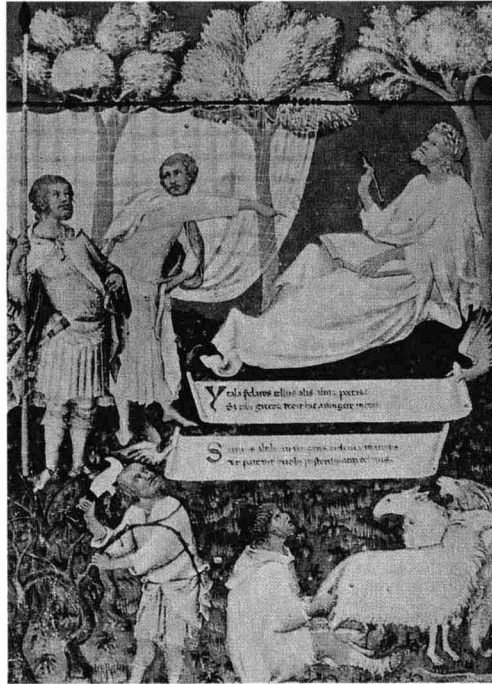
Any man of importance in those times, king or pope, prince or cardinal, needed a secretary, that is a man of culture whose main occupation was to compose his patron's speeches, his letters and other important messages. These all had to be written in Latin. Sometimes the secretary became so famous, and was so much respected for his culture and literary style, that he delivered very important speeches to heads of state in person. Often he was sent as emissary from one court to another like a travelling ambassador. His credentials were his breadth of culture.

One can easily imagine the influence of such a man. Once he had won the confidence of his employers, he might be chosen as adviser in all sorts of matters. But the young Petrarch did not value his influential position very much; he preferred to spend his time continuing his studies in Greek and Latin literature, at his country retreat of Vaucluse, near Avignon. In this way the philosophy and the values of the ancients opened in front of him, and his medieval Christian upbringing was challenged by an alternative classical culture. The Greek love of physical beauty, of nature, of freedom and the ideals of the Greek city-states appeared side by side with the historical awareness, political power and firm determination of the Romans.

Out of that power Petrarch rediscovered the importance of liberal studies, or, as Cicero had called them, the *Studia Humanitates*: those studies considered essential to a free man in Greek and Roman times. These were grammar, rhetoric (the art of speech-making), history, poetry and moral philosophy, the studies which educate one to speak, read and write as a man of culture. *Humanist* was the name given to those who received such an education. Humanism is the name given by historians to the entire phenomenon in the fifteenth century. Rebirth or Renaissance, was the cultural movement that resulted, restoring to life a culture and values which had been buried for centuries.

The importance of humanism cannot be over estimated. Petrarch, who tried to widen the knowledge of the Greek language, very

Simone Martini, title page
from a manuscript of
Vergil owned by Petrarch,
1340, 29.5 × 20 cm,
Ambrosiana Library,
Milan.



little known in Europe during the Middle Ages, could say that only in that way might 'writers who had been dumb for years again come to life'. He was referring of course to Homer and Plato.

Humanism spread, to begin with, mostly in Italy and France, but by the sixteenth century it was known throughout Europe. During the fourteenth century humanists were considered, by most of the established intelligentsia, to be the cause of all evil! Cardinal G. Dominici, a teacher at the university of Padua and writer of renown, referring to Florentine humanists wrote that: 'They were the instrument used to corrupt politics, religion, family, education.' The love of classical culture and the love of nature was their sin; even Petrarch found it difficult to reconcile his love for beauty, plants and flowers with his deeply held Christianity.

THE INFLUENCE OF THE ANCIENT WORLD ON THE VISUAL ARTS

Even before Petrarch, sculptors and painters were looking to the ancient world for inspiration. In Italy, where the remains of Greek and Roman art were everywhere to be seen, artists already had an unconscious knowledge of classical sculptures and buildings. Thus,

Nicola Pisano, *Nativity*,
c. 1260, relief panel,
marble, 85 × 113 cm, Pisa
Baptistery.



around 1250, in the sculptures of Nicola Pisano, we find an awareness of classical statuary apparent not only in the thick enveloping forms of his draperies, but also in figures entirely borrowed from ancient groups.

Giotto, the greatest Italian pre-Renaissance painter, was the first to paint the Virgin Mary solidly placed on her throne, and looking more like a Roman matron than the mother of Jesus. Even though in the middle of the fourteenth century there was a rejection of Giotto's realism in favour of a more formal art, his and Pisano's message was not neglected for long.

This rejection and subsequent reaction were due to the Black Death, the plague which swept through Italy especially from 1348 to 1350 and made men, in anguish and fear, seek the Church's protection. They prayed to placate an angry God. Many artists did not survive. Those who did, artists like Orcagna, the leader of the Florentine School in the latter part of the fourteenth century, painted static images, isolated in cold celestial spheres. Images of death, glorified, triumphant and, alas, omnipotent, inspired most compositions. Orcagna's fresco cycle for the nave of Santa Croce in Florence, painted about 1350 with *The Triumph of Death*, *The Last Judgement* and *Hell*, reflects such an attitude both in content and style.



above
Giotto di Bondone, *Virgin Enthroned with Angels*, c. 1306–10, wood panel, 325 × 204 cm, Uffizi, Florence.



above right
Limbourg Brothers, *May*, from *Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*, 1413–16, 29 × 21 cm, Musée Condé, Chantilly.

INTERNATIONAL GOTHIC – A NEW COURTLY STYLE

By the end of the fourteenth century a further reaction had come from the French courts of Paris and Burgundy. A new zest for life and a new love of beauty in objects, dress and entertainment is suddenly reflected in the miniatures and illustrations which, like a silent film, unfold to tell us about the ornate and glittering court world. This new style, called International Gothic, swept through Europe in the opposite direction to that in which the Black Death had already passed. In this style the Limbourg brothers illustrated the manuscripts of the Duke of Berry's prayer book, the *Très Riches Heures*. In it are pictures of John, Duke of Berry, brother of Charles V of France, spending graceful hours with his wife and ladies-in-waiting, or with his hunting companions. There they are, on horses as elegant as unicorns, riding through meadows not simply cultivated but combed, where the colours of the jewels, gowns and weapons are of the same enamelled intensity as the sky, water and foliage which surround them.

It is the world of an aristocracy, a privileged group of people who appear for the first time in the history of Western painting to appreciate and seek a life of comfort and of sophisticated taste. Nature is taken into account, but it is a nature which has had to come to terms with courtly life. To be included, it has had to be arranged, gilded, set, all awkward corners smoothed away, in other words, tamed.

In Italy such a style enchanted artists like Lorenzo Monaco,

Stefano da Verona,
*Madonna of the Rose-
Garden*, c. 1420, tempera
on panel, 63.5 × 46.2 cm,
City Museum, Verona.



Gentile da Fabriano, Pisanello, Stefano da Verona, Gentile Bellini and others. Furthermore these artists enriched the style with that sometimes neglected, but in no way lost, component of medieval Italian painting, the formal manner of Byzantine art. The rich carpet-like effects of Stefano da Verona's *Madonna of the Rose-Garden* evoke in its *hortus conclusus*, or walled garden, not only a precious man-made and courtly nature, but also the subtle perfume and enchanting mystery of the Orient.

As well as the interest in the exotic and sophisticated, the International Gothic style certainly developed a new visual awareness on the part of the public and a keen sense of observation in the artist. It is obvious from the finished work that such exquisite craftsmanship needed artists intensely aware of the shape and quality of all objects, not least of natural ones. The sketch books of numerous artists of this period reveal their skill. Pisanello's drawings, for instance, are evidence of many hours of patient observation in the careful rendering of animals, flowers, the heavy, silky folds of the train of a walking damsel, the feathers in the cape of a gentleman's costume.