

“Sistine” Works of Renaissance Art That Every Student Should Know



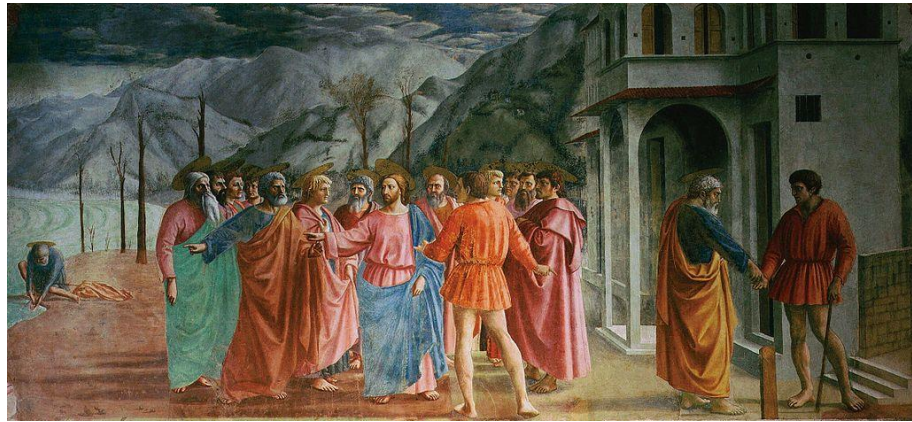
EARLY RENAISSANCE ART (Quattrocento) 1400-1490

The fifteenth century was a formative period of Renaissance art known as **Quattrocento** (Latin for 400 - the century with a four in it), during which Renaissance art developed into a style that was clearly distinguishable from medieval art, incorporating linear perspective, realistic portrayals of human subjects, and a greater incorporation of classical themes (while still producing plenty of beautiful religious art).

Masaccio, *The Tribute Money*

1425

Tommaso di Ser Giovanni di Simone -- known as Masaccio (“Sloppy Tom”) for taking no care for his appearance because he was too passionate about painting to care about anything else -- had a powerful influence on the development of Renaissance painting during his short life (he died at 26).



The Tribute Money depicts a scene from the Gospels, in which Jesus asks Peter to go to a fish and open its mouth to remove a coin that will allow them to pay the Temple Tax. Masaccio was the first Renaissance painter to employ **linear perspective** and used **chiaroscuro** shading to direct the viewer’s attention to Jesus. Both of these techniques pioneered by Masaccio would become prominent in Renaissance painting.

Brunelleschi, Florence Cathedral Dome Completed in 1436

Construction on the Florence Cathedral began in 1296 in the Gothic style of the Middle Ages but as construction continued, Florentines became increasingly fascinated with classical architecture. The Florentines wanted their cathedral to have a dome, but no one had any idea how to construct one, as the secrets of the architectural arts of the Romans had been lost.

That is, until Filippo Brunelleschi, a gifted sculptor and architect, began to study the Roman Pantheon and other architectural marvels, making detailed sketches and taking precise measurements. Brunelleschi gained confidence in his ability to construct a dome based on classical designs and won the commission after a hard-fought battle. Fighting every step of the way with people who envied his talents, Brunelleschi’s dream finally became a reality when the Florence Cathedral was consecrated, with a finished dome, in 1436 - 140 years after construction began.



Photo by Petar Milošević

Donatello, *David* (Bronze)

c. 1440s

Christians tend to keep their clothes on. As a result, the classical art of sculpting nude human figures, which had been so common in ancient Greece and Rome, had all but ceased to exist in the Middle Ages. Donatello, the most gifted sculptor of his age (and possibly of all time, depending on who you ask) was an avid student of classical art and sought to recreate the style with his statues of David, a biblical king of Israel. In sculpting *David*, Donatello combined the classical and Christian traditions by sculpting a biblical hero in the classical style.

Early in his career, Donatello sculpted a fully clothed marble *David*, which was admired but didn't gain nearly as much attention as the bronze *David*, which was sculpted sometime later. The bronze *David* was the first freestanding nude sculpture of a male figure since classical antiquity. This statue is believed to be a product of **Medici patronage**, demonstrating the creative license that secular patronage offered to Renaissance artists.

The bronze *David* is portrayed as youthful and is crowned with a laurel wreath (a classical symbol for victory). He wears a slight smile as if he is still trying to process what had happened. His foot is perched casually on Goliath's severed head and he holds the sword of his vanquished foe.



Photo by Patrick A. Rodgers

Botticelli, *Adoration of the Magi*

1475-1476

The *Adoration of the Magi* was an early painting of Botticelli's that distinguished his mastery of the art of painting. Vasari, author of *Lives of the Artists*, notes that the faces of the onlookers are not only painted from different angles and looking in different directions, but also have varied facial expressions.

Although the subject of the painting is religious, this painting also glorifies Florence's wealthiest citizens who patronized Botticelli and other artists. Several members of the Medici family are present, with Cosimo having the honor of glorifying the Christ Child. Botticelli stands at the bottom right, placed among the first citizens of Florence.



Botticelli, *The Birth of Venus*

1484-1486

Sandro Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, commissioned by the Medici family, depicts Venus, the Roman goddess of love and beauty, rising out of the sea, bringing a scene from classical mythology to life. The prominent presence of a nude female in a painting was scandalous by medieval standards but had been common during the classical period that Renaissance humanists were seeking to recreate in their time.



Primavera, a similar work by Botticelli with sensual portrayals of female figures from classical mythology, is also well-known but not quite as iconic as *The Birth of Venus*.

Perugino, *Delivery of the Keys*

1481-1482

Perugino's *Delivery of the Keys* is arguably the most recognizable painting in the **Sistine Chapel** that was painted by someone other than Michelangelo. It depicts a biblical scene in which Jesus gives the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven – shown as literal keys here – to Peter and tells him that He will build His Church on the rock of Peter and his profession of faith.



This scene is particularly important because it explains the Catholic doctrine of papal supremacy, as the pope claims to be the successor to Peter, the first Bishop of Rome. Those who enter the pope's personal chapel are reminded of the basis for the pope's claim to authority over all Christians.

The background of the painting is filled by works of classical architecture built in the Greco-Roman style. The triumphal arches on either side balance the painting. And Perugino uses light to direct the viewer toward Jesus and Peter. Mixed in with the apostles are figures wearing contemporary Renaissance clothing.

Early in his career, Perugino was regarded as the best painter of his time. His style built a bridge between the Quattrocento style of the fifteenth century and the High Renaissance style that developed at the turn of the sixteenth century. Later in his career, he was eclipsed by the work of the High Renaissance masters, such as Leonardo, Michelangelo and Raphael. But as Raphael's teacher, he would leave a lasting legacy as the man who taught the greatest painter of the Renaissance how to paint.

HIGH RENAISSANCE ART

1490-1527

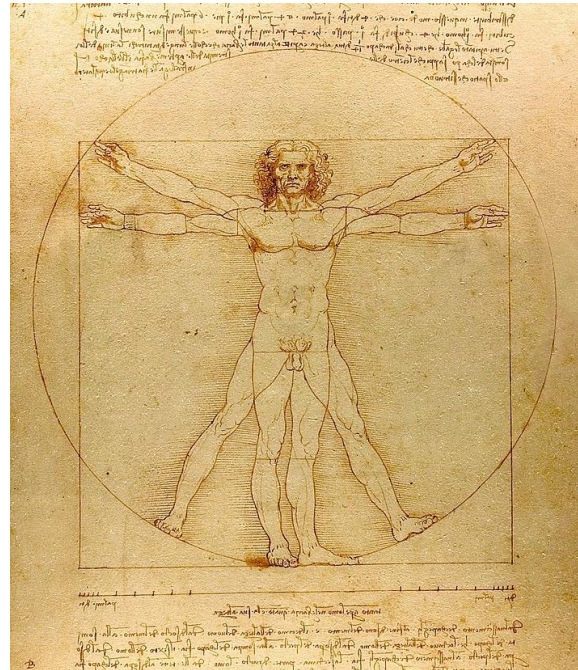
The High Renaissance was the peak of artistic achievement in Renaissance art and literature, during which the greatest Renaissance masters – Leonardo, Michelangelo, and Raphael – perfected the idealized realistic portrayal of humanity in art.

Leonardo da Vinci, *Vitruvian Man*

c. 1490

One of the distinguishing characteristics of High Renaissance art is an obsession with human anatomy. Leonardo da Vinci was particularly obsessive, producing countless sketches of the human frame, muscles, and internal organs. The most famous of these sketches is the *Vitruvian Man*, which he drew according to the ideal proportions established by the ancient Roman architect, Vitruvius, who wrote that the human body was the inspiration for the orders of architecture. The human body, like a building, has ideal proportions that the greatest artists will understand in order to create works that are lifelike in a perfect sort of way.

Leonardo's studies of classical anatomy, combined with his own observations of the human body, brought Renaissance art to a level that had been unmatched even by classical artists.



Michelangelo, *Pietà*

1498-1499

A *pieta* (an Italian word meaning "pity") describes any artistic representation of the Virgin Mary cradling the dead body of Jesus Christ. Although many artists have depicted this scene, Michelangelo's *Pietà* is the most iconic.

Michelangelo took so much pride in his accomplishment that when he realized that some viewers thought another sculptor had made it, he carved MICHAELANGELUS BONAROTUS FLORENTINUS FACIEBAT (Michelangelo Buonarroti, Florentine, made this) across the Virgin's chest. While this resonated with the increasingly secular and individualistic spirit of the Italian Renaissance, Michelangelo, a devout Catholic, reportedly felt guilty about his burst of pride and swore never to sign any of his works again.

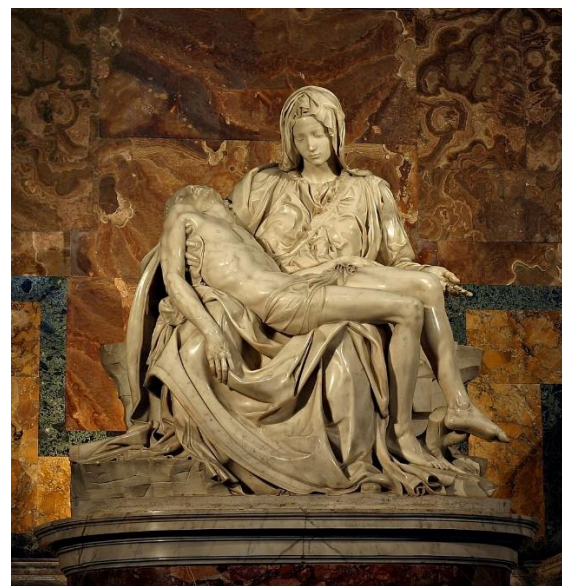


Photo Credit: Stanislav Traykov

Leonardo da Vinci, *The Last Supper*

1490s



The Last Supper depicts the moment when Jesus announced to His apostles that one of them would betray him. The apostles are shown in groups of three, expressing varying degrees of anger, shock, and grief. In the group next to Jesus' right shoulder, John leans toward Peter while Judas shrinks back, holding a sack of money. *The Da Vinci Code*, a popular book adapted to film, promotes the theory that da Vinci intended for John to represent Mary Magdalene, but art historians do not buy this, noting Leonardo's tendency to feminize men.

While Leonardo's *The Last Supper* is one of the most recognized paintings in the world, it is one of the most poorly preserved paintings in history. Rather than paint a fresco on wet plaster, Leonardo painted *The Last Supper* on a dry wall in order to enhance the coloring and give him more time to modify the painting as he worked. The painting began deteriorating almost immediately and numerous attempts have been made to preserve and restore it. Copies of the painting give us the best picture of how the original might have looked.

Leonardo da Vinci, *Mona Lisa*

1503-1506

The *Mona Lisa* is the most widely recognized Renaissance painting that exists and deserves inclusion here for that reason, alone. Although there has been speculation about the subject of the painting – including a theory that it is a feminized self-portrait of Leonardo – documentary evidence makes a strong case for this being a portrait of Lisa del Giocondo, the wife of a wealthy Florentine silk merchant.

The subject's direct eye contact with the viewer and Leonardo's use of *sfumato* to blur the transitions from light to dark make it seem as if the viewer is looking at a real person rather than just a painting.

The *Mona Lisa* is housed in the Louvre. It has been vandalized several times, including by one man who claimed to be in love with the painting and cut it with a razor blade, hoping to steal it. Shortly before World War I, an Italian patriot who was employed at the Louvre stole it, believing that the classic Italian painting belonged in Italy. The painting was later recovered and returned to the Louvre after being briefly displayed in Florence.



Michelangelo, *David*

1501-1504

The large block of marble that would become Michelangelo's *David* sat idly for decades before the leaders of Florence could find someone who could be trusted to sculpt something worthy of its value. Michelangelo received the commission and spent two months of his life sculpting the most recognizable statue of the Renaissance.

The representation of a biblical figure in the heroic nude style of classical Greece and Rome represents the merging of the Christian and classical traditions that was at the core of Renaissance humanism. Goliath is absent from this sculpture, as David is portrayed as calm and ready to strike before his battle with the giant (rather than after his victory, as was depicted by Donatello). David assumes a **contrapposto** stance, with all of his weight resting on his straightened right leg.

In addition to being a prominent figure in the Bible, David was often used as a political symbol by the Republic of Florence, a city-state that continually found itself standing against powerful enemies. David stands defiantly with his eyes turned toward Rome as a challenge. The statue was attacked on a few occasions by Florentine citizens who saw it as an expression of the power of the Medici family.

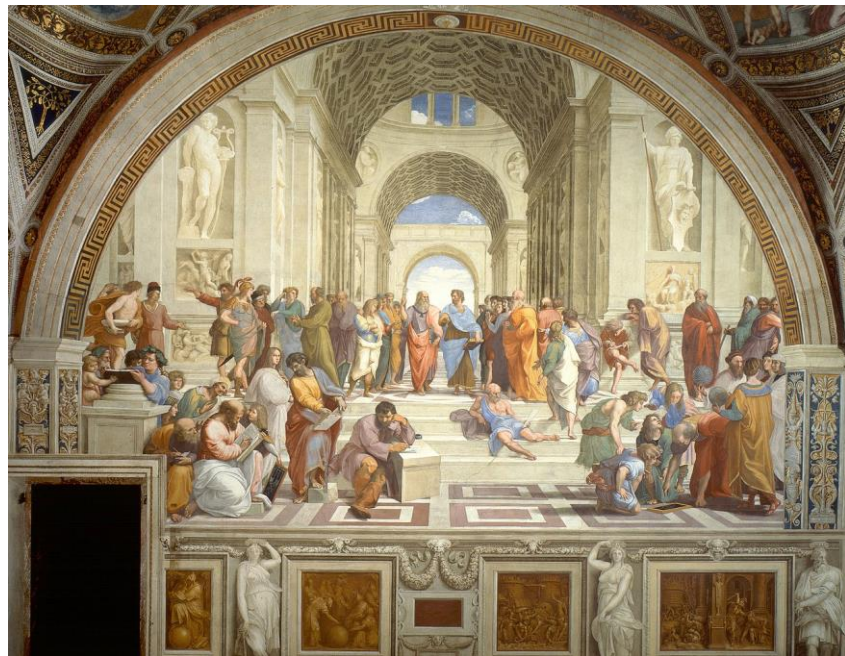


Photo Credit: Jörg Bittner Unna

Raphael, *The School of Athens*

1509-1511

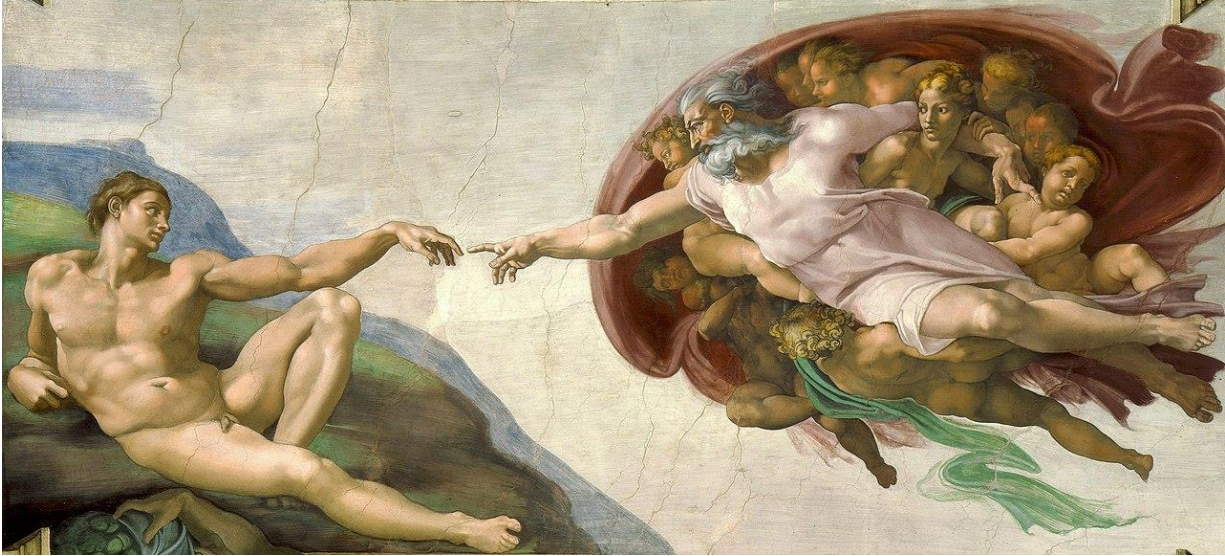
Raphael's *The School of Athens* is the embodiment of the classical spirit and artistic perfection of the Renaissance. Not only does the painting achieve balance, perspective, and realism, but it features the great philosophers of classical antiquity together all in one room. At the center, **Plato** (modeled after Leonardo da Vinci) debates philosophy with his pupil, **Aristotle**, with Plato pointing to the sky to illustrate his idealism while Aristotle's hand hovers above the ground, inviting his teacher to consider physical realities as a starting point for human understanding.



Socrates stands a short distance away from Plato and Aristotle, engaging a group of people around him. Diogenes, the cynic philosopher, sits alone on the steps while Raphael stands in the bottom right corner next to the Persian prophet, Zoroaster, who is holding a model of the stars in his hand.

Michelangelo, *The Creation of Adam*

c. 1512



The *Creation of Adam* forms the centerpiece of Michelangelo's collection of paintings on the **Sistine Chapel** ceiling. It is part of a series of paintings on the ceiling that represent the Creation and Fall of Man, as well as God's promise of redemption and salvation for humanity.

The anatomically correct portrayal of Adam represents the meticulous studies of human anatomy undertaken by High Renaissance painters. Some observers have even noted the dark red background behind God resembles the human brain. Adam's limbs are portrayed in the same likeness as God's to show that he was created in His divine image. God's outstretched finger nearly touches Adam's, but Adam's finger does not quite touch God's, even though it would be possible if he were to will himself to stretch his finger. This illustrates both the humanistic belief in the human potential and Christian teachings about human sinfulness separating God and Man.

NORTHERN RENAISSANCE ART

1500-1600

During the fifteenth century, the Renaissance was an Italian phenomenon, but as the printing press allowed humanist writings and Renaissance culture to spread north of the Alps, where artists made their own adaptations of the Renaissance style.

Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Harvesters*

1565

While Raphael's *The School of Athens* epitomized Italian Renaissance painting with its all-star cast of classical philosophers, the Northern Renaissance emphasis on the ordinary can be seen in Pieter Bruegel's *The Harvesters*. There is no one of any note in this painting – just agricultural laborers going through their daily tasks of harvesting, eating, resting, and socializing. *The Harvesters* set the stage for modern landscape painting, which would become a prominent feature in Dutch Golden Age painting and Romantic painting.



