

Unit 5

Renaissance Europe



1. Donatello, *David*, circa 1440, bronze

Donatello's sculpture of David has been the subject of continuous inquiry and speculation, since nothing is known about the circumstances of its creation. It is first recorded in 1469 in the courtyard of the Medici palace, where it stood on a base engraved with an inscription extolling Florentine heroism and virtue. This inscription supports the suggestion that it celebrated the triumph of the Florentines over the Milanese in 1428. Although the statue clearly draws on the Classical tradition of heroic nudity, this sensuous, adolescent boy in jaunty hat and boots has long piqued interest in the meaning of its conception. In one interpretation, the boy's angular pose, his underdeveloped torso, and the sensation of his wavering between childish interests and adult responsibility heighten his heroism in taking on the giant and outwitting him. With Goliath's severed head now under his feet, David seems to have lost interest in warfare and to be retreating into his dreams.



In the *Speculum humanae salvationis* (a fourteenth-century compendium of imagery connecting personages and events of the Old and New Testaments, widely reprinted in the fifteenth), David's victory over Goliath symbolizes Christ's triumph over Satan. The laurel crown on the hat and the laurel wreath on which David stands are probably allusions to the Medici family, in whose palace the work was first documented in 1469. As a symbol of the republican spirit of Florence, he defeats tyrants who threaten the city. David had become a metaphor for the city, strong in protecting its freedoms from external threat.

2. Jan Van Eyck, *Arnolfini Portrait*, 1434, tempera and oil on oak panel

Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait* (1434), is undoubtedly one of the masterpieces in the National Gallery of London's collection. With brushwork so fine the effect seems photographic, hidden details, and playful visual effects, this painting is as visually intriguing as it is famed. It is also an informative document on fifteenth-century society, through van Eyck's heavy use of symbolism.

The subject of the *Arnolfini Portrait* is domestic: a man and a woman hold hands in an interior setting, with a window behind him and a bed behind her in natural symbolism of fifteenth century marital roles – while husbands went out to engage in business, wives concerned themselves with domestic duties. The clothes the pair are wearing would also have been intended as demonstrative, this time of wealth and social standing. Fur was an expensive luxury permitted by law only to the upper echelons of society, so van Eyck's patrons and sitters would have been making a conscious statement on their wealth and status by



having fur trimmed clothes (particularly as the blooming tree outside the window suggests that the day was warm). The colors of these garments and also of the bed hangings, are also significant: red, black, green and particularly blue were all fabulously expensive dyes, so again would have been intended to show the wealth of this couple, ditto the pure *amount* of fabric (heavy pleating uses more cloth, ergo clothes with pleats, folds, tucks etc. all cost more). Van Eyck also made sure to include tiny, beautiful details – such as the matching gold and silver cuffs on the couple’s wrists, extensive detailing around the edge of the woman’s veil, and a few highly expensive oranges on the chest beneath the window. These not only demonstrated his own talent for skilled, intricate brushwork, but also the following simple fact: that the couple pictured were not only wealthy, but educated – they knew how their money should be spent in order for it to reflect well on themselves.



This brings us to the question: who were this couple? The male subject to the viewer’s left of the scene is most recently thought to be a Bruges merchant named Giovanni di Nicolao Arnolfini, and the woman beside him his wife. However, there are several problems associated with the second half of this identification. The artist has clearly written on the painting, in ornate Latin, “Jan van Eyck was here 1434.” However, Giovanni’s wife had died in 1433, which presents the possible hypothesis: van Eyck had begun the work in 1433 while his patron’s wife was alive but she had died by the time he finished it, or it was simply a posthumous portrait. This theory is not unreasonable, and is supported by much of the visual content of the scene: the male figure’s loose grasp on the woman’s slipping hand, and the odd candles in the ornate chandelier – that on the man’s side is still whole and lit, while the opposite candle holder is empty aside from a few drips of wax, signifying that the man’s life light is still burning while hers has burnt out.

There is also, of course the mirror on the back wall of the scene – an object often associated with paintings which reflect on mortality and death. Posthumous portraits were also not unheard of; in 1472, in Urbino, [Italy](#), Duke Federico da Montefeltro had commissioned a diptych of himself and of his recently deceased wife. The double portrait survives to this day, with the pair continuing to face each other in death and in life, his face tanned and healthy while her face is marble

Returning to the *Arnolfini Portrait*, there is also a second possibility, that this is a depiction of a second marriage, for which the records have been lost. Certainly the woman’s face appears particularly young, almost doll-like – although this youth is no indication that she was a second wife, as girls could be married before they were even teenagers at this time. Her appearance is very fashionable, with a high, plucked brow and specifically styled hair. Scholarship does not seem to think that she is pregnant although she does immediately appear that way, but rather that she was lifting a great deal of heavy, pleated cloth in order to show off her expensive blue underskirt. Of course, this could be a mistake and the cloth could have been simply intended to draw attention to her waist; there is after all, no mistaking the obvious bed behind her, symbolically decked out entirely in red – an inarguable signifier of love, and passion.

The little dog at her feet demonstrates her fidelity to her husband. Her downwards gaze also shows her submission and meek obedience to the man holding her hand. This was the fifteenth-century after all; women were the property of their nearest male relation, and the thought of them doing anything other than concerning themselves with the wellbeing of their house and their family was nothing short of outrageous.

So far so good – all of the visuality is rather un-extraordinary; aside, of course, from the breathtaking detail and glowing command of colour with which the scene is depicted, and the actual attribution of the sitters' identities. However, there are several curious notes which make this work of realism stand out as particularly interesting. First and foremost, the mirror on the back wall – which, incidentally, could be a work of imagination, as it is significantly larger than mirrors could actually be made to be at this point – which has already been addressed, but not noted for its spectacularly high detailing. In the polished, convex glass surface, surrounded by beautiful miniature scenes of Christ's Passion, the backs of the couple are reflected – but also, delightfully along with the bright blue figure of the artist himself in order to present a true depiction of the painting scene. Due to the artist's inclusion, and of his large signature on the wall, the theory has been presented that the work was the equivalent of a marriage contract: the union has evidently been witnessed by the visual inclusion of a third figure, who has also helpfully signed the image in large, obvious script above the mirror to prove his presence. This theory of course would negate that of it being a commemorative portrait of the wife – but because of the absence of any concrete evidence proving either explanation one way or the other, neither can be proven or disproven. However, in 1990 a document came to light that certified the wedding of Giovanni Arnolfini and Giovanna Cenami occurred in 1447, 13 years after the portrait was painted and six years after the artist had died.

This ambiguity rather adds to the charm of this painting and demands that viewers look more closely at the beautiful, detailed workmanship in order to dig out their own ideas and theories about the work from independent visual analysis. Even if nothing but an appreciation of Jan van Eyck's supreme talent can be concluded from this work, that is surely a satisfactory conclusion to take away from the mysterious *Arnolfini Portrait*. Perhaps, if its subject *was* known, with all of its details and intricacies, then the work wouldn't be half as appreciated or investigated. Its charm lies in the stories and ideas which it inspires in the minds of those who look at it, into it, and dig beneath its surface; an absence of knowledge only adds to its beauty.

3. Pazzi Chapel. Florence, Italy. Filippo Brunelleschi (architect). c. 1422-1461

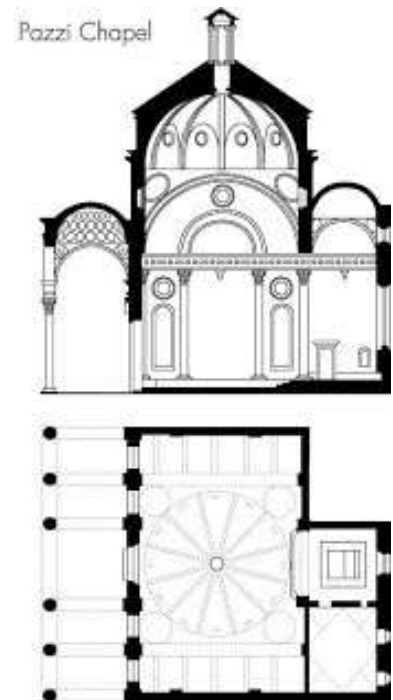
Filippo Brunelleschi built the Pazzi chapel as a perfect space with harmonious proportions. He could achieve this result by including in his project-plan the knowledge gained during his stay in Rome when he focused primarily on measuring ancient buildings, for instance the Pantheon. Andrea Pazzi, the head of a wealthy banking family in the neighborhood around Santa Croce, which included not only a large church but a Franciscan monastery, offered to build a chapter house for the monks as well as a structure that would function as a funerary chapel for his family. At this moment in time, Brunelleschi was the most admired and accomplished architect of the city.



The Pazzi Chapel was one of Brunelleschi's last commissions and much of it was built between 1442 and 1446, the year of the architect's death. But the building was nowhere close to completion by the time of the artist's passing. Work on the dome continued and finished in 1459, and parts of the interior decoration were supervised by Giuliano da Maiano in 1478. That year might have been one of celebration for the Pazzi family, except that they made the grave error of rebelling against the rule of the Medici family. The 'Pazzi Conspiracy', as it has come to be known, ended with the Pazzi family being exiled from Florence.



In this building Brunelleschi used several of the motifs he had experimented with at San Lorenzo, including the use of a classical architectural vocabulary (rounded arches, fluted pilasters with Corinthian capitals, proportional modular plan and elevations, semi-circular dome, and so on) and white stucco walls articulated with a rich gray stone. The spaces between the pilasters and in the pendentives of the vault are decorated with circular framed reliefs in glazed terra. The reliefs in the four pendentives, following a conventional pattern, are the four Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Each tondo is supported by a shield motif bearing the Pazzi arms.



4. Fra Filippo Lippi, *Madonna and Child with two Angels*, c. 1460-1465, tempera on panel



Fra Filippo Lippi's life and art are pitched between religion and sensuality, piety and a Renaissance passion for this world. Born poor in 1406 in the district of the Carmine convent in Florence, he was placed there as a child. He chafed against his presumed vocation. Luckily, he had powerful protectors: the Medici, for whom he painted his Annunciation (probably 1450s), now in the National Gallery. Lippi's biographer Vasari claims that Cosimo de' Medici loved Lippi despite his antics, and saw his fiery nature as typical of "rare minds".

Lippi was chaplain to a convent in Prato, near Florence, where, says Vasari, he was painting an altarpiece for the nuns of St Margherita. There he saw the "beautiful and graceful"

Lucrezia Buti, a novice. He persuaded the nuns to let him paint her as Our Lady, then persuaded Lucrezia to run away with him. The nuns were shamed, Lucrezia's father "never smiled again" - but she stayed with Filippo.

There is documentary confirmation of the tale - Lippi was denounced to Florence's office of the monasteries and of the night for having Buti, her sister and five other nuns living with him between 1456 and 1458. The friar and nun had a son and, later, a daughter.

The Virgin Mary in this most delicate and earthy of Florentine religious paintings has traditionally been identified as Lucrezia. Certainly, the same model poses as Mary in his circular, beautiful, *Madonna and Child With the Birth of the Virgin* and *The Meeting of Joachim and Anna* (c1452 or mid to late 1460s) in the Pitti Palace, Florence. These two paintings stand out among Lippi's works for the emotionally involved representation of a Madonna who seems unequivocally a real woman.

This Virgin's secular beauty is undeniable; she wears a huge pearl over her finely styled hair and a string of pearls receding in a striking triangle from her high forehead. Her sculpted face, the shadows playing on her cheek, her bowed nose and strong lips - all is crisply yet tenderly seen. She sits on an ornate piece of furniture in a grey stone window through which we see cultivated fields, soaring rocks, a distant city. This is crucial to the painting's intimacy; it brings the Madonna forward. Her shadow is on the frame in a painting lit from the right - another physical, as opposed to spiritual detail. She is in front of it, like an actor at the front of a stage.

She inspires passionate filial devotion in Christ, who is lifted up on the shoulders of two angels. The angel in the foreground is the painting's riskiest figure. He doesn't seem to be playing his part at all; he seems to be a real child, forgetting his pose, looking back at the painter, laughing. This is one of the most beautiful paintings of the Florentine Renaissance, a daring example of the humanizing of religion that goes back to Giotto and, intellectually, to St Francis of Assisi. Just as St Francis used humble imagery to make Christianity accessible, Renaissance painters made the relation between Mary and child that of a real mother and baby. Here, the Madonna is a beauty to whom Christ and Lippi are in thrall.

Just as it's tempting to identify the Madonna as Lucrezia, so the laughing angel has traditionally been seen as a portrait of their son, Filippino. He also became a painter, creating some of the greatest Renaissance grotesques in the Strozzi Chapel frescoes at Santa Maria Novella, Florence.

5. Sandro Botticelli, *Birth of Venus*, c. 1485, tempera on canvas

Like most artists in the second half of the fifteenth century, Sandro Botticelli (1445–1510) learned to draw and paint sculptural figures that were modeled by light from a consistent source and placed in a setting rendered illusionistic by linear perspective. An outstanding portraitist, he, like Ghirlandaio, often included recognizable contemporary figures among the saints and angels in religious paintings. He worked in Florence, often for the Medici, then was called to Rome in 1481 by Pope Sixtus IV to help decorate the new Sistine Chapel along with Ghirlandaio, Perugino, and other artists. Botticelli returned to Florence that same year and entered a new phase of his career. Like other artists working for patrons steeped in Classical scholarship and humanistic thought, he was exposed to philosophical speculations on beauty—as well as to the examples of ancient art in his employers' collections.

For the Medici, Botticelli produced secular paintings of mythological subjects inspired by ancient works and by contemporary Neoplatonic thought. Art historian Michael Baxandall has shown that these works were also patterned on the slow movements of fifteenth century Florentine dance, in

which figures acted out their relationships to one another in public performances that would have influenced the thinking and viewing habits of both painters and their audience.

The overall appearance of Botticelli's *Primavera*, or Spring, recalls Flemish tapestries, which were very popular in Italy at the time. And its subject—like the subjects of many tapestries—is a highly complex allegory



(a symbolic illustration of a concept or principle), interweaving Neoplatonic ideas with esoteric references to Classical sources. In simple terms, philosophers and poets conceived Venus, the goddess of love, as having two natures. The first ruled over earthly, human love and the second over universal, divine love. In this way the philosophers could argue that Venus was a Classical equivalent of the Virgin Mary. *Primavera* was painted at the time of the wedding of Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de'



Medici and Semiramide d'Appiano in 1482. The theme suggests love and fertility in marriage, and the painting can be read as a lyrical wish for a similar fecundity in the union of Lorenzo and Semiramide—a sort of highly refined fertility dance.

Several years later, some of the same mythological figures reappeared in Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, in which the central image represents the Neoplatonic idea of divine love in the form of a nude Venus based on an

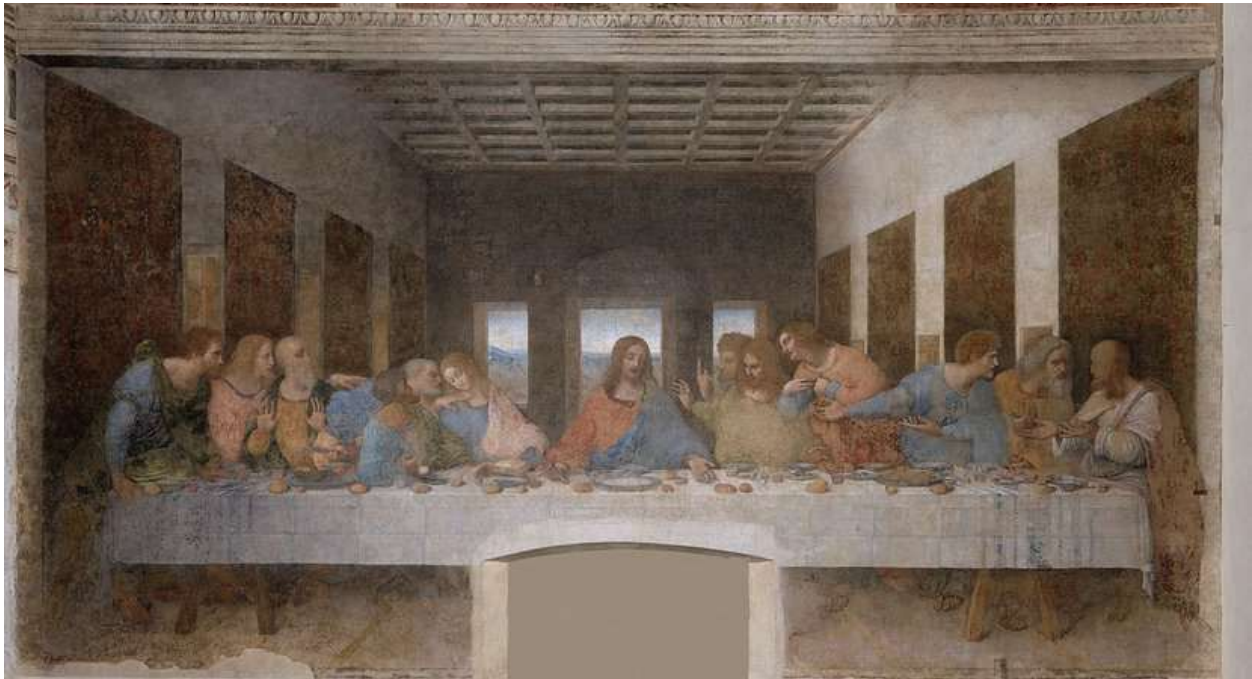
antique statue type known as the “modest Venus” that ultimately derives from Praxiteles' Aphrodite of Knidos. Botticelli's Classical goddess of love and beauty, born of sea foam, averts her eyes from our gaze as she floats ashore on a scallop shell, gracefully arranging her hands and hair to hide—but actually drawing attention to—her sexuality. Indeed, she is an arrestingly alluring figure, with voluminous hair highlighted with gold. Blown by the wind—Zephyr (with his love, the nymph Chloris)—Venus arrives at her earthly home. She is welcomed by a devotee who offers Venus a garment embroidered with flowers. The circumstances of this commission are uncertain. It is painted on canvas, which suggests that it may have been a banner or a painted tapestry-like wall hanging.

This is a work of tempera on canvas. During this time, wood panels were popular surfaces for painting, and they would remain popular through the end of the sixteenth century. Canvas, however, was starting to gain acceptance by painters. It worked well in humid regions, such as Venice, because wooden panels tended to warp in such climates. Canvas also cost less than wood, but it was also considered to be less formal, which made it more appropriate for paintings that would be shown in non-official locations (e.g. countryside villas, rather than urban palaces).

6. Leonardo da Vinci, *Last Supper*, 1498, tempera and oil on plaster

During the 15th century, Florentine painters firmly believed that the motions of the mind should be apparent in the facial expressions and bodily gestures of their painted figures. This was seen to be particularly important in the case of narrative paintings. For the refectory of the church of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan, Leonardo painted *Last Supper*. Cleaned and restored in 1999, the mural is still in a poor state, in part because of the painter's unfortunate experiments with his materials. Nonetheless, the painting is both formally and emotionally Leonardo's most impressive work. Christ and his 12 disciples sit at a long table placed parallel to the picture plane in a simple, spacious room. The austere setting amplifies the painting's highly dramatic action. Christ, with outstretched hands, has just said, "One of you is about to betray me" (Matt. 26:21). A wave of intense excitement passes through the group as each disciple asks himself and, in some cases, his neighbor, "Is it I?" (Matt. 26:22). Leonardo visualized a sophisticated conjunction of the dramatic "One of you is about to betray me" with the initiation of the ancient liturgical ceremony of the Eucharist, when Christ, blessing bread and wine, said, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this for a commemoration of me. . . . This is the chalice, the new testament in my blood, which shall be shed for you" (Luke 22:19–20).

In the center, Christ appears isolated from the disciples and in perfect repose, the calm eye of the stormy emotion swirling around him. The central window at the back, whose curved pediment arches above his head, frames his figure. The pediment is the only curve in the architectural framework, and it serves here, along with the diffused light, as a halo. Christ's head is the focal point of all converging perspective lines in the composition. Thus, the still, psychological focus and cause of the action is also the perspectival focus, as well as the center of the two-dimensional surface. The two-dimensional, the three-dimensional, and the psycho-dimensional focuses are the same.



Leonardo presented the agitated disciples in four groups of three, united among and within themselves by the figures' gestures and postures. The artist sacrificed traditional iconography to pictorial and dramatic consistency by placing Judas on the same side of the table as Jesus and the other disciples.

The light source in the painting corresponds to the windows in the Milanese refectory. Judas's face is in shadow and he clutches a money bag in his right hand as he reaches his left forward to fulfill the Master's declaration: "But yet behold, the hand of him that betrayeth me is with me on the table" (Luke 22:21). The two disciples at the table ends are quieter than the others, as if to bracket the energy of the composition, which is more intense closer to Christ, whose serenity both halts and intensifies it. The disciples register a broad range of emotional responses, including fear, doubt, protestation, rage, and love. Leonardo's numerous preparatory studies—using live models— suggest that he thought of each figure as carrying a particular charge and type of emotion.

Like a stage director, he read the Gospel story carefully, and scrupulously cast his actors as the New Testament described their roles. In this work, as in his other religious paintings, Leonardo revealed his extraordinary ability to apply his voluminous knowledge about the observable world to the pictorial representation of a religious scene, resulting in a psychologically complex and compelling painting. The painting's careful geometry, the convergence of its perspective lines, the stability of its pyramidal forms, and Jesus' calm demeanor at the mathematical center of all the commotion together reinforce the sense of gravity, balance, and order. The clarity and stability of this painting epitomize High Renaissance style.

Instead of painting in fresco, Leonardo devised an experimental technique for this mural. Hoping to achieve the freedom and flexibility of painting on wood panel, he worked directly on dry intonaco—a thin layer of smooth plaster—with an oil-and tempera paint for which the formula is unknown. The result was disastrous. Within a short time, the painting began to deteriorate, and by the middle of the sixteenth century its figures could be seen only with difficulty. In the seventeenth century, the monks saw no harm in cutting a doorway through the lower center of the composition. The work has barely survived the intervening period, despite many attempts to halt its deterioration and restore its original appearance.

7. Albrecht Dürer, *Adam and Eve*, 1504, engraving

Albrecht Dürer signed his full name and authorship in Latin, ALBERTUS DÜRER NORICUS FACIEBAT 1504, in a high and prominent place, overlooking the scene he created of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. The subject of this highly celebrated engraving fills the frame. Adam and Eve, wearing only leaves, stand before the dark and dense forest that is Dürer's vision of the Garden of Eden.

Dürer was an acute observer and transcriber of the natural world, and he rendered objects and people with the closest possible attention to their form and character. What is difficult for modern eyes to discern, however, is the symbolic aspect of this bravura display of the details of the natural world. This is the moment before the Fall.

The serpent gives Eve the apple, Adam stands ready to receive it. He holds the branch of an ash tree, the symbol of the Tree of Life. A fig tree stands between Adam and Eve, providing the leaves that cover her, but, curiously, also bears apples, suggesting that it is also the



Tree of Knowledge with its forbidden fruit. Among the animals we discover in the foliage, four are especially significant: the cat, ox, rabbit, and elk, who collectively represent the four temperaments of man that are unleashed by the events in the story of Adam and Eve. Other details invite bemused speculation: Does Adam step on the outstretched tail of a mouse? Has the cat fallen asleep between mouse, rabbit, and bird above? Does the ram refer to the story of Abraham and Isaac, or does it sit behind the tree as a symbol of the future Christ? Is the stillness of the scene, like the calm before the storm, suggestive of imminent tragedy? Does the goat on the high crag in the background peer into an abyss?

How does this curious blend of motifs further the story of Adam and Eve? A departure from Genesis The answer is that the picture tells us primarily about the Renaissance, about Germany, and about Dürer himself rather than the text of Genesis, from which it departs most strikingly. The poses of the two human figures are contrived to show off this German artist's knowledge of classical (Greco-Roman) proportions. Based on the ideals of the Roman architect Vitruvius, the proportions of the face—for instance the distance from forehead to chin—determine the ideal proportions of the rest of the body. Dürer sacrifices naturalism to showcase his mastery of Vitruvian ideals.

Colorful, tropical parrots were collector items in Germany, and they were also symbols in art. The call of the parrot was believed to sound like “Eva Ave” —Eve and Ave Maria (“Hail Mary”)—the name of a prayer in honor of the Virgin Mary). This word play underpins the Christian interpretation of the story of the Fall of Humanity by characterizing the Virgin Mary, mother of Christ, as the antidote for Eve's sin in the Garden of Eden. The other animals bear other symbolic meanings. The elk, ox, rabbit, and cat exemplify the four humors or human personality types, all of which correlate with specific fluids in the body.



- Gloomy: elk, black bile
- Indifferent: ox, phlegm
- Positive: rabbit, blood
- Irritable: cat, yellow bile

Only Adam and Eve are in perfect balance internally. After the Fall, one humor predominates in everyone, throwing our temperaments into imbalance. Dürer's placid animals signify that in this moment of perfection in the garden, the human figures are still in a state of equilibrium. The cat does not yet chase the mouse, and the goat (a reference to the scapegoat of the bible) is still standing on his mountain perch.

So finely rendered are the textures and so fully rounded are the dimensions that we almost forget that there is no color in this work of art. Its story is evocative and imaginative and rendered with technical brilliancy, while the figures have been rendered in accordance with principles of human proportion that Dürer strove to articulate and write about. From his writings on human proportions in *Aesthetic Excursus*, we have his thoughts:

“I hold that the more nearly and accurately a man is made to resemble man, so much better will the work be. If the best parts, chosen from many well-formed men, are fitly united in one figure, it will be worthy of praise. The Creator fashioned men once and for all as they must be, and I hold that the perfection of form and beauty is contained in the sum of all men.”

Dürer traveled from Germany to Italy in 1494, ten years before this engraving was made, and he returned a second time shortly after its publication. It is generally understood that in his travels Dürer sought knowledge of anatomical proportions as embodied in classical works of art. As we see in this beautiful engraving and in his writing, his achievement was to bring together the ideas of religious faith, classical aesthetics, and impeccable artistry.

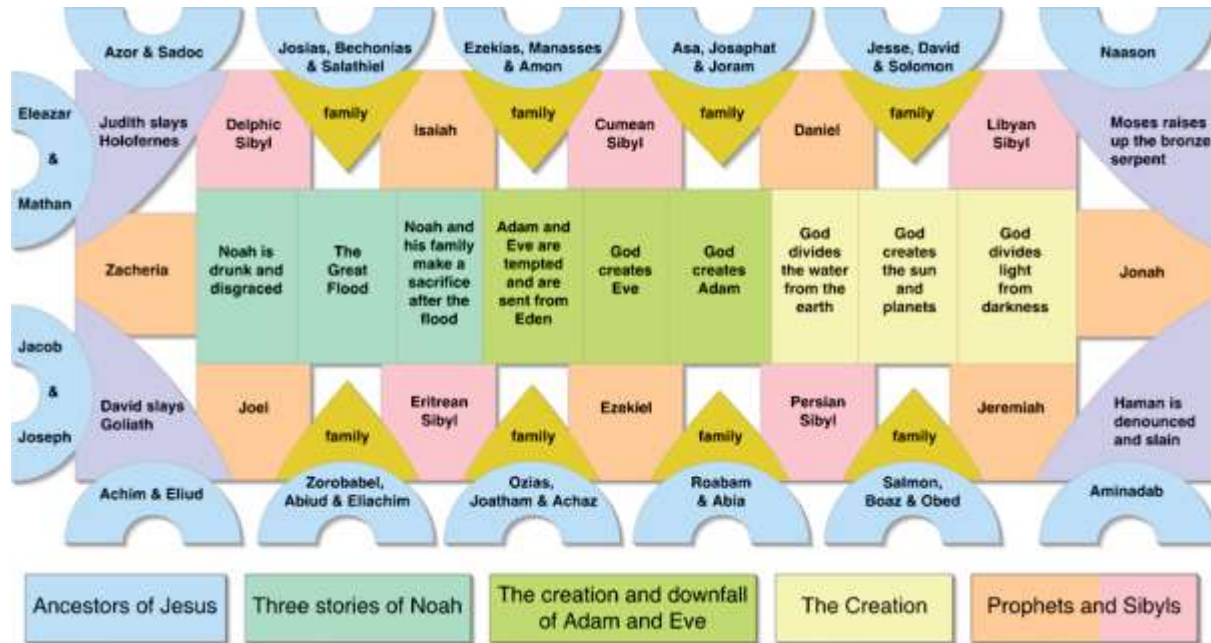
8. Michelangelo, *Ceiling of the Sistine Chapel*, fresco, 1508-1512

When Julius II suspended work on his tomb, the pope gave the bitter Michelangelo the commission to paint the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in 1508. The artist, insisting that painting was not his profession (a protest that rings hollow after the fact, but Michelangelo’s major works until then had been in sculpture, and painting was of secondary interest to him), assented in the hope that the tomb project could be revived.



Michelangelo faced enormous difficulties in painting the Sistine ceiling. He had to address the ceiling’s dimensions (some 5,800 square feet), its height above the pavement (almost 70 feet), and the complicated perspective problems the vault’s height and curve presented, as well as his inexperience in the fresco technique. (Yet, in less than four years, Michelangelo produced an unprecedented work—a monumental fresco incorporating his patron’s agenda, Church doctrine, and the artist’s interests.

Depicting the most august and solemn themes of all, the creation, fall, and redemption of humanity— themes most likely selected by Julius II with input from Michelangelo and a theological adviser, Michelangelo spread a colossal decorative scheme across the vast surface. He succeeded in weaving together more than 300 figures in an ultimate grand drama of the human race.

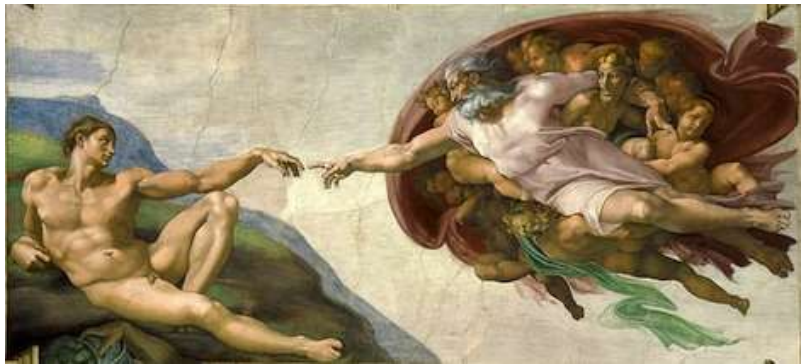


A long sequence of narrative panels describing the creation, as recorded in Genesis, runs along the crown of the vault, from God’s Separation of Light and Darkness (above the altar) to Drunkenness of Noah (nearest the entrance to the chapel). Thus, as viewers enter the chapel, look up, and walk toward the altar, they review, in reverse order, the history of the fall of humankind. The Hebrew prophets and pagan sibyls who foretold the coming of Christ appear seated in large thrones on both sides of the central row of scenes from Genesis, where the vault curves down. In the four corner pendentives, Michelangelo placed four Old Testament scenes with David, Judith, Haman, and Moses and the Brazen Serpent. Scores of lesser figures also appear. The ancestors of Christ fill the triangular compartments above the windows, nude youths punctuate the corners of the central panels, and small pairs of putti in *grisaille* (monochrome painting using shades of gray to imitate sculpture) support the painted cornice surrounding the entire central corridor. The overall conceptualization of the ceiling’s design and narrative structure not only presents a sweeping chronology of Christianity but also is in keeping with Renaissance ideas about Christian history. These ideas included interest in the conflict between good and evil and between the energy of youth and the wisdom of age. The conception of the entire ceiling was astounding in itself, and the articulation of it in its thousands of details was a superhuman achievement.

The Sistine Chapel does not produce “picture windows” enframing illusions just within. Rather, the viewer focuses on figure after figure, each sharply outlined against the neutral tone of the architectural setting or the plain background of the panels. Here, as in his sculpture, Michelangelo relentlessly concentrated his expressive purpose on the human figure. To him, the body was beautiful not only in its natural form but also in its spiritual and philosophical significance. The body was the manifestation of the soul or of a state of mind and character. Michelangelo represented the body in its most simple, elemental aspect—in the nude or simply draped, with no background and no ornamental embellishment. He always

painted with a sculptor's eye for how light and shadow communicate volume and surface. It is no coincidence that many of the figures seem to be tinted reliefs or freestanding statues.

One of the ceiling's central panels is Creation of Adam. Michelangelo did not paint the traditional representation but instead produced a bold humanistic interpretation of the momentous event. God and Adam confront each other in a primordial unformed landscape of which Adam is still a material part, heavy as earth. The Lord transcends the earth, wrapped in a billowing cloud of drapery and borne up by his powers. Life leaps to Adam as if a spark flashed from the extended, mighty hand of God. The communication between gods and heroes, so familiar in classical myth, is here concrete. This blunt depiction of the Lord as ruler of Heaven in the Olympian pagan sense indicates how easily High Renaissance thought joined classical and Christian traditions. Yet the classical trappings do not obscure the essential Christian message.



Michelangelo replaced the straight architectural axes found in Leonardo's compositions with curves and diagonals. For example, the bodies of the two great figures are complementary—the concave body of Adam fitting the convex body and billowing “cloak” of God. Thus, motion directs not only the figures but also the whole composition. The reclining positions of the figures, the heavy musculature, and the twisting poses are all intrinsic parts of Michelangelo's style.

9. Michelangelo, *Last Judgment*, Sistine Chapel, altar wall, fresco, 1534-1541

While the Last Judgment was a traditional subject for large church frescoes, it was unusual to place a fresco at the east end, over the altar. The traditional positioning was on the west wall, over the main doors, at the back of the church, so that each member of the congregation was reminded of its possible fate on their way out of church. It might be either painted on the interior or in a sculpted tympanum on the exterior. However, a number of late medieval panel paintings, mostly altarpieces, were based on the subject with similar compositions, although adapted to a horizontal picture space. Many aspects of Michelangelo's composition reflect the well-established traditional Western depiction, but with a fresh and original approach.

Most traditional versions had a figure of Christ depicted in majesty in about the same position as Michelangelo's, although even larger than his, with a greater disproportion in scale to the other figures. As here, compositions contained large numbers of figures, divided



between angels and saints around Christ at the top, with the souls being judged down below. Typically there is a strong contrast between the ordered ranks of figures in the top part, and the chaotic and frenzied activity below, especially on the right side that leads to Hell. The flow of souls usually began at the bottom (viewer's) left, as here, with resurrected souls rising from their graves and moving towards judgement. Some pass judgement and continue upwards or to the left, to join the company in heaven, while others pass over to the right and then downwards towards Hell in the bottom right corner (compositions had difficulty incorporating Purgatory visually). The damned souls may be shown naked, as a mark of their humiliation as devils carry them off, and sometimes the newly resurrected souls too, but angels and those in Heaven are fully dressed, their clothing a main clue to the identity of groups and individuals.

The painting is noted for its radical departure from traditional depictions of the Last Judgment. In particular, the overall structure replaces the traditional pattern of horizontal layers depicting heaven, earth, and hell with a single large space. The figures are grouped into individual plastic formations and are placed in isolation characteristic of eternity's terrible emptiness.

At the center of the work is a depiction of Christ, captured in the moment preceding the pronouncement of the verdict of the Last Judgment. To Christ's right is his mother, the Virgin Mary, who turns her head in a gesture of resignation: in fact she can no longer intervene in the decision, but only await the result of the Judgment.



Surrounding Christ in a slow rotary movement are figures, identified as the saints and God's elect. Most notable are San Pietro (Saint Peter) holding the Keys of Heaven San Lorenzo (St Lawrence) with the gridiron, San Bartolomeo (St Bartholomew) with his own skin, which is usually recognized as a self-portrait of Michelangelo, St Catherine of Alexandria with the cogwheel and St Sebastian kneeling holding the arrows. Many others, even some of the larger saints, are difficult to identify.

Several of the main saints appear to be showing Christ their attributes, the evidence of their martyrdom. This used to be interpreted as the saints calling for the damnation of those who had not served the cause of Christ, but other interpretations have become more common, including that the saints are themselves not certain of their own fate, and try at the last moment to remind Christ of their sufferings.

In the center of the lower section are the angels of the Apocalypse, who are awaking the dead with the sound of long trumpets. On the left, the risen recover their bodies as they ascend towards heaven; and on the right, angels and demons fight over making the



damned fall down to hell. Below this detail is the representation of Hell, against the backdrop of a red sky in flames, and of Charon, leading the damned into hell where they are greeted by Minos, whose body is wrapped in the coils of the serpent. This part clearly references the Hell of Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

In the center above Charon is a group of angels on clouds, seven of which are blowing trumpets (as in the Book of Revelation), with others holding books that record the names of the Saved and Damned. To their right is a larger figure of a soul who has just realized that he is damned, and appears paralyzed with horror. Two devils are pulling him downwards.

Michelangelo is able to convey the full force of terror at the supreme moment, when fate comes swiftly and where there is no time left or opportunity available to fix one's mistakes. This instant represented by Michelangelo ends up having a universal connotation, as if it symbolizes the moment when life ends and no hope remains.

The entire painting is dominated by the human figure, almost always presented fully naked. The bodies are represented with great expressiveness and power.

The reception of the painting was mixed from the start, garnering much praise but also criticism on religious and artistic grounds. Both the amount of nudity and the muscular style of the bodies have been one area of contention, with the overall composition being another. The Last Judgment became controversial as soon as it was seen, with disputes arising between critics in the Catholic Counter-Reformation, and supporters of the genius of the artist and the style of the painting. Michelangelo was accused of being insensitive to proper decorum in respect of nudity and other aspects of the work, and of pursuing artistic effect over following the scriptural description of the event.

The mixing of figures from pagan mythology with depictions of Christian subject matter was also objected to, as were the figures of Charon and Minos, wingless angels, and the much classicized depiction of Christ. Beardless Christs had in fact only finally disappeared from Christian art some four centuries earlier, but Michelangelo's figure was unmistakably Apollonian. Further objections related to failures to follow the scriptural references.

The angels blowing trumpets are all in one group, whereas in the Book of Revelation they are sent to "the four corners of the earth." Christ is not seated on a throne, contrary to Scripture. Such draperies as Michelangelo painted are often shown as blown by wind, but it was claimed that all weather would cease on the Day of Judgement. The resurrected souls are in mixed condition, with some appearing as skeletons while most are depicted with their flesh intact.

The controversies continued for years leading into 1564, after the death of Michelangelo, with a decision by the Congregation of the Council of Trent to have some of the figures of the Judgement that were considered "obscene" covered. The task of painting the covering drapery, the so-called "*braghe*" (pants), was given to Daniele da Volterra, since then known as the "*braghettoni*." Daniele's "*braghe*" were only the first and in fact others were added in the following centuries. Despite this censorship, the painting has not lost its strong expressive power. In fact, today, after the recent restoration, it still appears as one of the most intense paintings in art history.



10. Raphael, *School of Athens*, 1509-1511, fresco

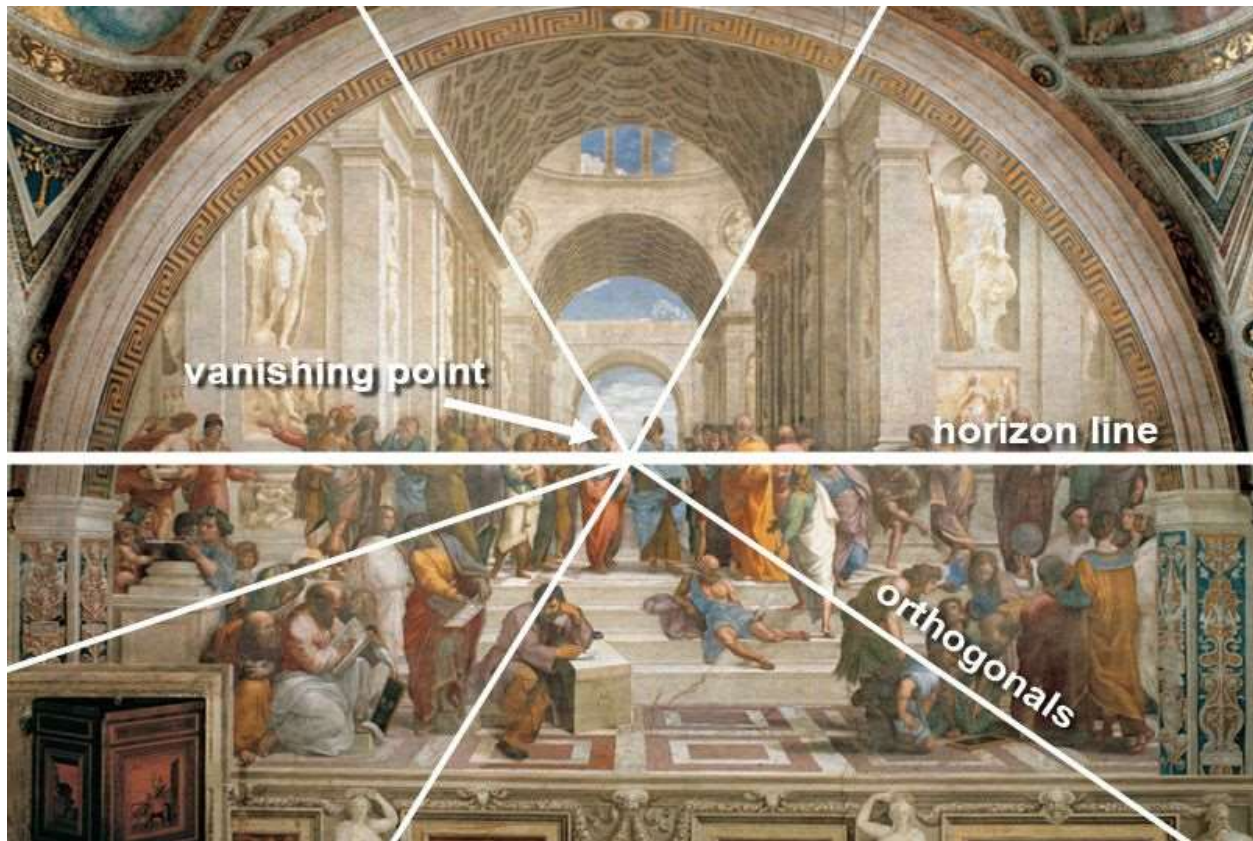
The School of Athens represents all the greatest mathematicians, philosophers and scientists from classical antiquity gathered together sharing their ideas and learning from each other. These figures all lived at different times, but here they are gathered together under one roof.

The two thinkers in the very center, Aristotle (on the right) and Plato (on the left, pointing up) have been enormously important to Western thinking generally, and in different ways, their different philosophies were incorporated into Christianity. Plato holds his book called *The Timaeus*. Plato points up because in his philosophy the changing world that we see around us is just a shadow of a higher, truer reality that is eternal and unchanging (and include things like goodness



and beauty). For Plato, this otherworldly reality is the ultimate reality, and the seat of all truth, beauty, justice, and wisdom. Aristotle holds his hand down, because in his philosophy, the only reality is the reality that we can see and experience by sight and touch (exactly the reality dismissed by Plato). Aristotle's *Ethics* (the book that he holds) "emphasized the relationships, justice, friendship, and government of the human world and the need to study it." Pythagoras (lower left) believed that the world (including the movement of the planets and stars) operated according to mathematical laws. These mathematical laws were related to ideas of musical and cosmic harmony, and thus (for the Christians who interpreted him in the Renaissance) to God. Pythagoras taught that each of the planets produced a note as it moved, based on its distance from the earth. Together, the movement of all the planets was perfect harmony -- "the harmony of the spheres." Ptolemy (he has his back to us on the lower right), holds a sphere of the earth, next to him is Zoroaster who holds a celestial sphere. Ptolemy tried to mathematically explain the movements of the planets (which was not easy since some of them appear to move backwards!). His theory of how they all moved around the earth remained the authority until Copernicus and Kepler figured out (in the late 1500s) that the earth was not at the center of the universe, and that the planets moved in orbits the shape of ellipses not in circles.

Raphael included a self-portrait of himself, standing next to Ptolemy. He looks right out at us. Despite their rivalry, Raphael added Michelangelo at the last minute as Heraclitus writing on the steps.



The total conception of *The School of Athens* suggests the spirit of Leonardo's *The Last Supper* rather than the Sistine ceiling. Raphael makes each philosopher reveal 'the intention of his soul.' He further distinguishes the relations among individuals and groups and links them in formal rhythm. The artist worked out the poses in a series of drawings, many of them from life. Also in the spirit of Leonardo is the symmetrical design, as well as the interdependence of the figures and their architectural setting. But Raphael's building plays a greater role in the composition than the hall of *The Last Supper*. With its lofty dome, barrel vault, and colossal statuary, it is classical in spirit, yet Christian in meaning.

The building is in the shape of a simplified Greek cross to suggest the harmony of pagan philosophy and Christian theology. There are two huge niche sculptures. To the left is Apollo with a lyre, who reappears as the central figure in the mural *Parnassus*. To the right is Athena in her Roman guise as Minerva, goddess of wisdom and patron deity of the arts, who, in the words of the poet Dante, hastens the arrival of Apollo.

11. Lucas Cranach, *The Law and the Gospel (Allegory of Law and Grace)*, c. 1529, oil on wood

Lucas Cranach the Elder (circa 1472–1553) was a German Renaissance painter and court artist to the Electorate of Saxony—a State of the Holy Roman Empire. He was chiefly known for creating works for the leaders of the Protestant Reformation, which was led by Cranach's close friend Martin Luther. One element of the dispute between Catholics and Luther's followers involved issues concerning salvation. The Catholic Church espoused that believers could ensure salvation by attending to the sacraments, as

well as making financial donations. Luther believed that salvation was open to all of the faithful independent of their actions. Shown here is an influential artistic theme of the Reformation movement—the allegory of law and gospel—which portrays Luther’s belief in the importance of Scripture in his understanding of salvation. The most effective and successful of the doctrinal Protestant representations came from the school of Lucas Cranach, the contrast between the Law and the Gospel, or the Old and New Testaments.

The earliest example from Lucas Cranach the Elder comes from the later 1520s. It is based on the antithesis, a form used so often throughout Reformation propaganda. The visual space is divided down the center by a tree, to the left of which is depicted the Law as expounded in the Old Testament. In the left background, Adam and Eve eat the fruit of the tree of life after being tempted by the serpent. As a result of this original sin, man is the prey of death and the Devil, through he can only be damned, indicated by the two figures hounding Man into the jaws of hell. This is Man under the Law, signified by Moses holding the tables of the Ten Commandments, with other Old Testament prophets behind him. In the clouds above, Christ as Lord of the world sits judging man, with the sword and the lily in his ears. Two figures, Mary and John the Baptist, seek to intercede for sinful man, although in vain. The gloomy message of the Old Testament and the Law, which only condemn man, is also signified in the barren branches on the Old Testament side of the antithesis formed by the central tree.



In opposition to the hardness of the Law, the Gospel brings hope, signified by the blooming branches on the New Testament side of the tree. In the background is depicted, however, an Old Testament scene, the brazen serpent, the figure of Christ's saving death on the cross. On the hill in the right background Mary receives the rays of heavenly grace, signifying the incarnation, further indicated

by the angel bearing the cross down to her. To the left, further indicated by the angel brings the news of the birth of the Savior to the shepherds on the hills of Bethlehem. The main figures on this side depict the events through which the Gospel message is realized. The crucified Christ sheds his saving blood in a stream onto man. Through the agency of the Holy Spirit, the dove through which the stream passes, this becomes the saving water of baptism. Man has his attention called to the sacrificial death of Christ by the figure of John the Baptist. Beneath the crucifix is the paschal lamb, the symbol of Christ's victorious death, which is completed by his resurrection. This is depicted in the bottom right-hand corner, where Christ overcomes death and the apocalyptic beast, representing the Devil. This completes man's release from sin and death, neatly balancing the corresponding depiction on the far left.

This schema became one of the most popular themes of the Reformation, largely because it captured so effectively the gist of Luther's doctrine. Indeed, it seems to have been most directly inspired by some of Luther's expositions on the theme of the Law and the Gospel, such as that in his commentary on Galatians. It was a wholly biblical depiction and relied on signs accessible to every person of the time. Above all, it established a uniquely evangelical position, without reference to papal or Catholic teaching. It could be used purely as a visual representation, or supplied with appropriate biblical references.... The Law is headed by a citation from Romans 1.18: "The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men." The Gospel is headed by a verse of Isaiah 7.14, which shows the prophetic link between the Old and New Testaments: "The Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son." Beneath the depiction of the Law are quotations spelling out its significance (Romans 3.23; 1 Corinthians 15.56; Romans 4.15; Romans 3.20 and Matthew 11.13). The Gospel is likewise supplied with texts on faith (Romans 1.17 and 3.21 --both classic expressions of the basic Lutheran doctrine that the just live through faith), and expressing the hope of salvation (John 1.29; 1 Peter 1.2 and 1 Corinthians 15.55). The combination of scriptural texts and visual signs expressing their content made such a depiction the evangelical version of the Pauper's Bible.

12. Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Hunters in the Snow (Winter)*, 1565, oil on wood

The life and work of Pieter Bruegel the Elder are shrouded in mystery. We do not know about his place or date of birth, his formal schooling, if any, or his training as an artist. In the early 1550s he visited Italy, but little is known of what he did there. He left behind him no letters or other writings and there are no reports of his thoughts or opinions from either friends or witnesses. In many ways, he is as elusive as Shakespeare. But the parallels don't end there because, like Shakespeare, Bruegel bridges the gap between high and low art to convey a truly universal epic vision. Although he left only 40-odd paintings, his extraordinary power and range embracing comedy, tragedy and fantasy place him among the greatest painters in history.

He was probably born about 1525 in or near Breda, which is in the modern Netherlands, but settled fairly early in Antwerp, where under the name of Pieter Brueghel he became a master in the painters' guild in 1551 (unaccountably, he dropped the 'h' from his surname a few years later, though his sons Pieter and Jan restored it to theirs). After his trip to Italy, he returned to Antwerp and started work for Hieronymous Cock, an engraver and publisher of prints. He was also apprenticed to Pieter Coecke van Aelst, another Flemish painter, and it was this friendship that inducted him into Humanist circles in the city. It also introduced him to Mayken, the daughter of Pieter Coecke and Mayken Verhulst Bessemers, whom he married in 1563. His mother-in-law was also a painter, and it was she who taught his two sons after his early death in 1569.

After their marriage, the Bruegels settled in Brussels, where Pieter acquired a patron and friend, Nicolaes Jonghelinck, a wealthy merchant and art dealer who eventually made a collection of 16 of his works. They include a series of landscapes on the months, only 5 of which survive, the most famous (below) being the one known as *Hunters in the Snow* (each panel may have portrayed two months, so that only the April-May painting is lost).

Painted in the bitter February of 1565 at the beginning of the 'Little Ice Age', this exquisite landscape – surely the most celebrated secular snow scene ever produced – gives us more than a hint of Bruegel's genius. No painter before or after has so brilliantly conveyed the atmosphere of a northern winter and no work of art has ever so perfectly suggested the awesome power of nature, towering over the lives of the dark figures who are briefly part of it. You can almost feel the chill in your cheeks as you look at the hunters, hunched against the cold and accompanied by their undernourished dogs, bringing home a solitary animal, while women build fires and other figures try to cope in various ways in the bitter cold. And yet there is vitality too. In the valley to which Bruegel draws us down diagonally via the trees and the airborne bird, we see figures cavorting on the ice, skating, curling and playing hockey in the shadow



of the icy mountains in testimony to the power of the human spirit. It is a common theme of Bruegel's stoical Humanism: life may be nasty, brutish and short, and nature may be cruel and indifferent to human needs, but man's search for meaning and purpose through the everyday struggle of existence is a never-ending quest.

Famous for the realism of his landscapes with the interplay of humans and nature, Bruegel's artistic plan hints how human activity adapts to an environment both majestic but indifferent, where we are only one part in contrast to the dead of winter where life is otherwise mostly still. The inn on the left

has its sign hanging by only one hook, waiting like the rest of the world for repair when life restarts. What water is trapped in the snow and ice ponds is mostly inaccessible. The mostly vertical foreground trees – contrasting with the far high horizon – are empty except for snow laying on the branches and a few black huddled birds, with one taking wing across the landscape high over the valley but still touching the far crags. The slight back sweep of the wings of the dark bird in flight with its long tail in contrast to the light background suggests to some a silhouetted kestrel, itself a hunter in the winter, but even if not, Bruegel as keen observer makes it likely this is a known bird. The village church bell towers echo but in orthogonal human fashion the ragged vertical peaks, both an antithesis and synthesis of human versus nature.