

# How Humanism and Individualism Shaped the Italian Renaissance

Paula N Stevenson

## Introduction

When the new social class movement, the Italian Renaissance, occurred around the 14<sup>th</sup> century, so began a revival of the classical forms originally developed by the ancient Greeks and Romans, a deep concern with profane life, and interest in humanism and assertions of the importance of the individual. This intellectual movement developed in Italy, specifically Florence. Thus, artists like Masaccio and Giotto represented art that, in contrast to the Middle Ages, showed emotions, feelings, and bright colors thereby, demonstrating a deep concern for naturalism within society. Individualism also played a significant role within the Italian Renaissance. The lives of humans were worthy of artistic recreation. Parallel to naturalism was the idea of humanism, the liberation and discovery of the individual, and it left a large impact on the arts. Alternative concepts surfaced throughout this era, for example, secularism and realism. Some artists, such as Giovanni Bellini, made use of those ideas, and showed their art through secular and non-secular themes, as well as concepts exhibited through landscapes and portraits. As new forms of linear and aerial perspective and pyramid structures came into use by Piero della Francesca and Alberti, paintings were ready to carry more recognizable concepts. As a result, the paintings became clearer and more vivid. Lastly, artists of the High Renaissance, such as Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Titian, and Raphael, developed paintings within the narrative style. They illustrated the body in an exceedingly natural and scientific manner, so demonstrating the various characteristics of everyday life. Overall, using a mixture of the two beneficial notions, individualism and humanism, craftsmen were expected to be skillful in more than one profession concurrently, such as literature, sculpture, design, and, most significantly, art.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Brown, 1936: 9-37; Adams, 2013: 28; Franklin,

## Humanism in Religion

Humanism emerged. This stressing classical authors, classical studies. The studies of grammar, rhetoric, philosophy, poetry, and history, humanism taught that no man was higher than criticism. To really learn,



**Figure 1:** Masaccio, *Tribute Money*, ca. 1424-1427, fresco, 8ft 1in x 19ft 7in, Brancacci Chapel Santa Maria del Carmine, Florence, Italy

you need to come back to the initial text. This was the first major plan the Renaissance delivered to Italy. They applied humanistic beliefs to religion, and used paintings as a medium to represent these views. For example,

Florentine Masaccio, a significant figure within early Renaissance art, represented society's belief of faith through the style of realism and perspective in works such as the *Tribute Money* (fig. 1) and the *Holy Trinity* (fig. 2), that displayed concepts of simplicity, unity,



**Figure 3:** Giotto, *Expulsion of Joachim from the Temple*, 1304-1306, fresco, 78.7in x 72.8in, Scrovegni Chapel (Arena Chapel), Padua

and quality. Giotto, another Italian creator, used the concept of realism for which a face was given defined characteristics and color. Thus, his painting the *Expulsion of Joachim from the Temple* (fig. 3), demonstrated a priority for



**Figure 2:** Masaccio, *Holy Trinity*, ca. 1424-1428, fresco, 21ft x 10ft 5in, Santa Maria Novella, Florence, Italy

naturalism as well as a revival of Classical forms.<sup>2</sup> Discussing Giotto's piece, Laurie Schneider Adams states, "[i]n the context of the humanist movement, [the forms] denote newness and thus the future events of the new dispensation."<sup>3</sup> This quote by Adams displays how Giotto was able to alter religious imagery more naturalistic. Sandro Botticelli, a famous painter in Renaissance Florence and favorite of the Medici family, created ornamental and colorful paintings. In his work, Botticelli exhibited many religious and pagan motifs and allowed the clear establishment of elegant pictures, however keeping the degree of *chiaroscuro* to a minimum.



**Figure 4:** Sandro Botticelli, *Birth of Venus*, ca. 1484-1846, tempera on canvas, 5ft 8in x 9ft 1in, Uffizi Gallery, Florence, Italy

His known and recognized work, however, the *Birth of Venus* (fig. 4) uses a mixture of mythology and religion, a preferred humanistic understanding adopted from the Greeks. In the article, *The Otherness of the Venetians*, Patricia Brown states, "[d]uring the Renaissance, Venice's artistic participation in the revival of antiquity was marked by a romantic nostalgic approach that grew out of this dual heritage of mythic origins."<sup>4</sup> The focus had turned from people as religious beings, to include the problems of people and nature in the human world.

### **Humanistic Style Change**

With the continuous growth of paintings and artists, prestige for art increased dramatically to the point in which religious aspects were shown through landscapes, portraits, and temperas. Space became broken down mathematically in design and painting to convey an illusion of reality. This allowed for the creation of new styles and mathematical input that manifested lifestyle with spiritual aspects. One artist

---

<sup>2</sup> Adams, 2013: 31-34.

<sup>3</sup> Adams, 2013: 32.

<sup>4</sup> Brown, *Otherness Venetians*: 17

who introduced bright, rich, strong colors into his palette and landscapes that expressed the happiness, calmness, and prosperity that Italy carried throughout the Renaissance was Giovanni Bellini. Afterward, the characteristics became a preferred Venetian cornerstone in painting. Other, important figures in the Italian Renaissance that demonstrated conceptual movements, in addition to a new form of knowledge, through their ingenious work, were artists Piero Della Francesca and Leon Battista Alberti. Francesca was skilled not only in art, but also in mathematics, he developed the idea of perspective. Adams and Nussdorfer, describe Francesca's method best stating, "[a]s in a painted perspective, where the viewer's eye is drawn along the orthogonals to the heart of the painting, so too in [the] relationship of building to street a focus on the building and by extension on its owner is produced."<sup>5</sup> Leon Battista Alberti, however, applied classical forms into architecture, and developed the pediment that became well-liked throughout the Italian Renaissance. His monasteries and churches represented several spiritual concepts, evident in his work of the *Santa Maria Novella* (fig. 5). All in all, the employment of common spiritual themes, like the annunciation, adoration, crucifixion, and also the common Madonna and Child paintings, were widely utilized by several Italians, particularly the Northern Renaissance.



**Figure 5:** Leon Battista Alberti, *West façade of Santa Maria Novella*, ca. 1458-1470, Florence, Italy

### **Humanism in the High Renaissance**

As the Renaissance hit its climax around the 16<sup>th</sup> century, a brand new generation of artists like Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael, Michelangelo, and Titian developed paintings that uncovered anatomic structure of humans for the people of Italy. The ability to draw a distinction between the past and present

---

<sup>5</sup> Adams and Nussdorfer, *The Italian City*: 213.



**Figure 6:** Michelangelo, *The Last Judgment*, 1534-41, fresco, Sistine Chapel, Vatican City, Rome, Italy

is new age. The Renaissance results in a view that society has come out of the darkness. Nature had previously been viewed negatively, but throughout the Renaissance, nature is perceived as something stunning and worth studying. This was otherwise called naturalism, which became apparent in the arts.

Artists were attempting to portray life as it was. In the past, drama typically included personified moralities. A more naturalistic portrayal of humans begins in the Renaissance. There was a more naturalistic use of space that demonstrated the concepts of pride and freedom that the body and people should carry throughout the Italian Renaissance. One in every of the foremost known of those four geniuses was Michelangelo who in his renowned piece, *The Last Judgment* (fig. 6) represents the notions of religious themes and in his sculpture of the *David* (fig.7), Michelangelo demonstrates the idealism of the nude. Another artist like Leonardo, in figural technique, was Raphael, who additionally followed a similar pattern as seen in some of his known paintings, exemplified by the *Madonna of the Meadow* (fig. 8). Another great creator that followed the same techniques to render nudity was Titian.



**Figure 7:** Michelangelo, *David*, 1501-1504, marble, 13ft 5in, Accademia Gallery, Florence, Italy



**Figure 8:** Raphael, *Madonna of the Meadow*, 1505, oil on panel, 3ft 8 1/2in x 2ft 10 1/4in, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

Rona Goffen expresses:

“[f]or Titian, humanity (male as well as female) was defined by sexuality, not merely by gender, and human sexuality has interpreted as a potent, positive quality central to the individual’s identity and a concomitant of her (or his) personality.”<sup>6</sup>

In Titian’s international style, he drew bold secular paintings that stressed many concepts regarding life and discovered its accomplishment within the High Renaissance. He created several nude paintings like the *Venus of Urbino* (fig. 9) that demonstrated the distinctive theme of status throughout the High Renaissance.



**Figure 9:** Titian, *Venus of Urbino*, 1538, oil on canvas, 4ft x 5ft 6in, Uffizi Gallery, Florence, Italy

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, several of the foremost Renaissance concepts of society, religion, and life became evident within the paintings and the art created. Humanism was the main concern for the people of Italy; to become powerful, creative individuals in a dynamic secular world. Starting from the beginning of the Renaissance, new ideas of naturalism and realism were embraced by important artists like Masaccio and Giotto. Other artists like Giovanni Bellini indicated new concepts of secularism through several landscapes. Whereas alternative artists, like Francesca and Alberti, devised new techniques specific to their spiritual motifs. Lastly, within the High Renaissance tolerance for nudes and concepts regarding life as well as the body began to expand in many of the paintings thus symbolizing freedom. Genius artists like Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Raphael, and Titian began to gain status thus creating deep prestige for the arts. In the Italian Renaissance, methodological constraints from the old were abandoned and new artistic discoveries made in the birth of elements, such as composition, perspective and color

---

<sup>6</sup> Goffen, *Profane Love and Marriage*: 112

application. To fully understand, we must see “the Renaissance as fundamentally defined by a revival of antiquity, [and] especially as inspired by the work and creative energies of the humanists.”<sup>7</sup> Moreover, through the varied themes, morals, and ideas that every painting carried, because of these important changes in society and religion, a brilliant period of rebirth took place in Italy. Art ceased to be a spiritual expression in the supernatural and became an expressive path for humanity and all that concerns man.

---

<sup>7</sup> Dempsey, Introduction: 16

## Works Cited

- Adams, Laurie Schneider. *Italian Renaissance Art*. 2nd ed. Boulder (CO: Westview Press, 2013): 31, 90, 101, 160, 318-293.
- Adams, Nicholas and Nussdorfer, Laurie. "The Italian City, 1400-1600" in *The Renaissance from Brunelleschi to Michelangelo: The Representation of Architecture*, ed. H.A. Million. (New York, 1997): 205-220.
- Brown, Patricia Fortini. "Venezianita: The Otherness of the Venetians." *Art and Life in Renaissance Venice* (1997): 9-37.
- Dempsey, Charles. "Introduction." *The Portrayal of Love* (1992): 3-19.
- Franklin, David. "Perugino and the Eclipse of Quattrocento Mannerism." *Painting in Renaissance Florence, 1500-1500*. Yale University Press, 2001.
- Goffen, Rona. "Titian's Sacred and Profane Love and Marriage." *Studies in the History of Art* (1991): 111-125.