Late Gothic/Early Renaissance in Italy

by Sophia

Late Gothic and Early Renaissance art in Italy is defined by the changes happening during this period. Shifts to classical ideals and elements were apparent as the Renaissance developed. This lesson covers:

☆ BIG IDEA

The Renaissance developed gradually over time, time that was interspersed with artists such as Giotto marking distinct instances where the shift to classical ideals was notable.

1. Period and Location: Late Gothic/Early Renaissance

The artwork and architecture covered in this lesson originates between 1200 and 1450 AD in Italy, highlighted on the timeline below. Remember, Italy is the birthplace of the European Renaissance, and this lesson focuses attention primarily on the city of Florence.
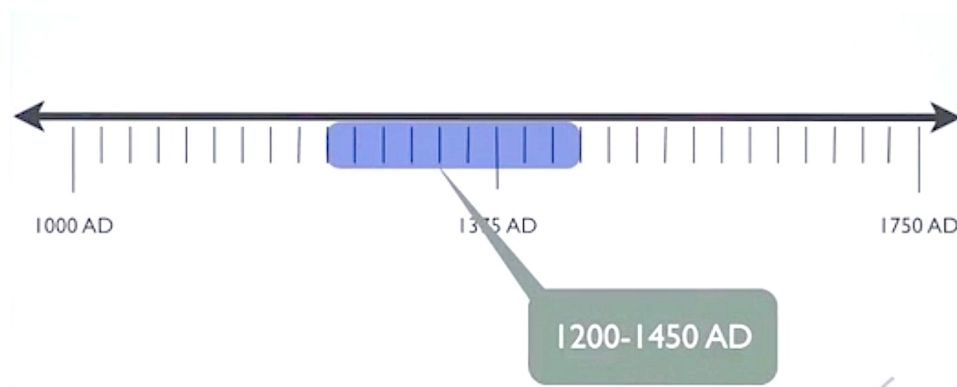
2. The Developing Renaissance

As we begin to explore this period, it is important to understand that the **Renaissance** did not just start, it developed. It developed gradually over time, and in different periods of time around Europe, beginning with Italy around the end of the 13th century.

The development of the visual style during this time can be attributed to a number of things, including:

- Rise of city-states in Italy
- Increase of trade
- Refinement of the concept of **humanism** in literature, attributed to the increase and eventual return to **naturalism** seen in the art of the Renaissance

📄 TERMS TO KNOW

Renaissance
A cultural movement marking a time of accelerated activity and learning expressed by art and literature in Europe during the 14th to 17th centuries

Humanism
Study or system of ethical practice that promotes human interests, values, scientific investigations, and human pleasures in the natural world and often rejects the belief in God

Naturalism
An artistic approach that involves reproducing objects as they appear to the eye. This term is often used in art history as a substitute for realistic, to avoid any confusion with realism as an artistic movement.

3. Late Gothic Art

Perspective in the two-dimensional visual arts had not been perfected by this time.

↗ EXAMPLE Below is an example of a fresco, titled *Peaceful City From Effects of Good Government in the City*, by the Italian artist Ambrosia Lorenzetti.

**Peaceful City From Effects of Good Government in the City by Ambrosia Lorenzetti**

1338 - 1339 AD

Fresco

This fresco shows attempts at creating a sense of depth, but notice that there is not a single vanishing point.

Italian Gothic art from this time also shows the continued influence of the Byzantine style, or **maniera greco**, which was used by Italian artists such as Duccio from Siena, and Bonaventura Berlinghieri.

⤷ EXAMPLE Below is an altarpiece of Saint Francis of Assisi by Berlinghieri.
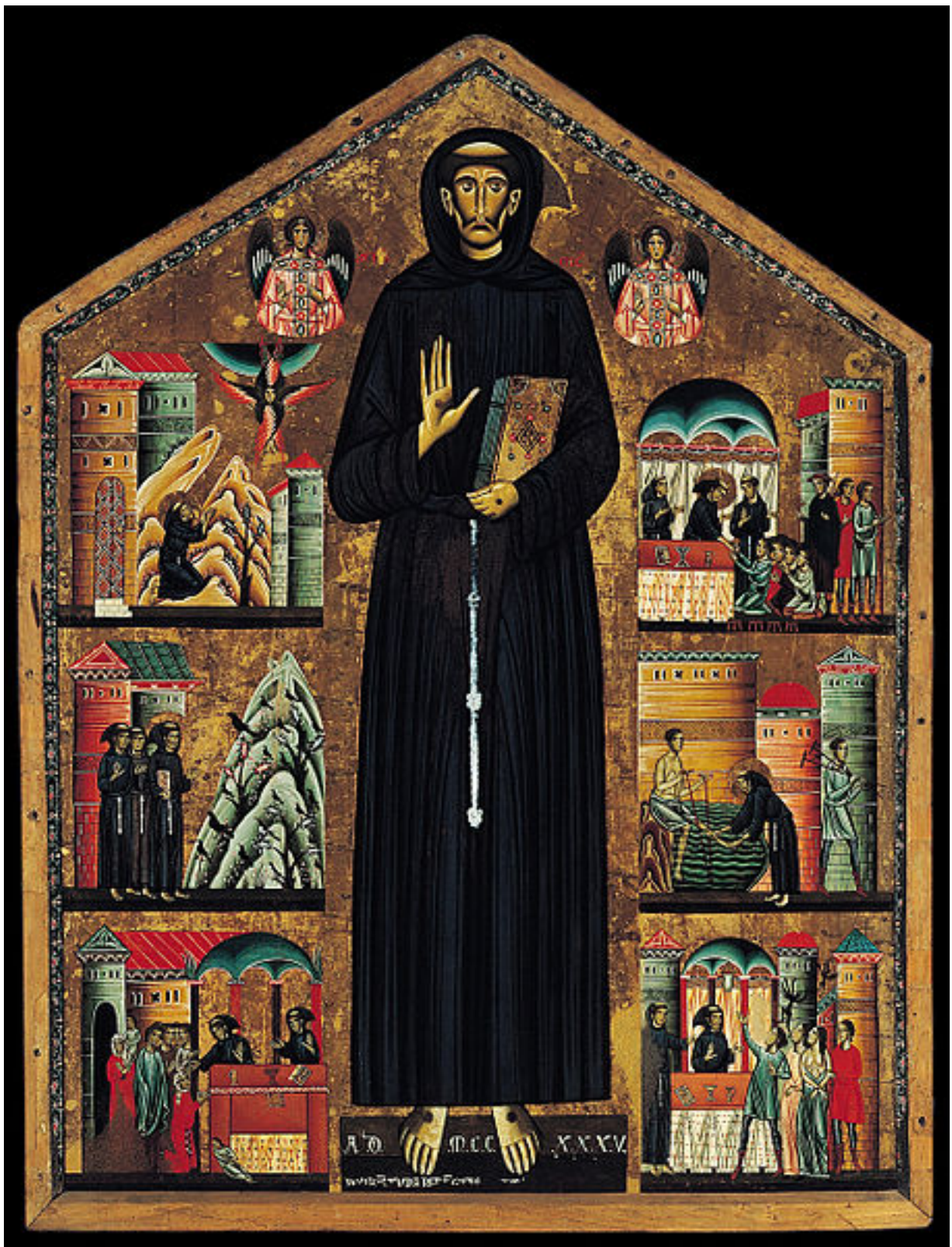
Saint Francis Altarpiece by Bonaventura Berlinghieri

1235 AD

Tempera on wood

Notice how the images in this above example are very flat. The folds of cloth appear as hard lines, and rather than gradients of shadow, there is a sharp contrast of black on color.

[?] **DID YOU KNOW**

Tempera paint was a limited medium in terms of creating shadow that suggested depth, as oil paint had not yet arrived as a medium.

TERMS TO KNOW

Perspective
A technique that depicts three-dimensional volume and space relationships on a flat surface

Maniera Greca
In Italian painting, the tendency to paint in the "Greek" style reminiscent of Byzantine icons, with stiff, flattened forms, hard lines that indicate folds in cloth, and the use of gold leaf

4. Cimabue and Giotto

The first artist to begin departing from the Byzantine style of Italian Gothic painting was Florentine artist Cimabue, also known as Cenni di Pepo or Cenni di Pepi.

↗ **EXAMPLE** Here is an example of Cimabue's work:

Madonna Enthroned with Angels by Cimabue

1280-1290 AD

The Byzantine influence is still here, particularly with the arrangement of forms and the golden background. However, instead of the flatness associated with the Byzantine style, Cimabue uses the architecture to create a sense of depth in the image, as well as space for the individual characters to recede into.

↱ EXAMPLE Compare the above example to another image of the Madonna and Child enthroned, by the artist known as Giotto:
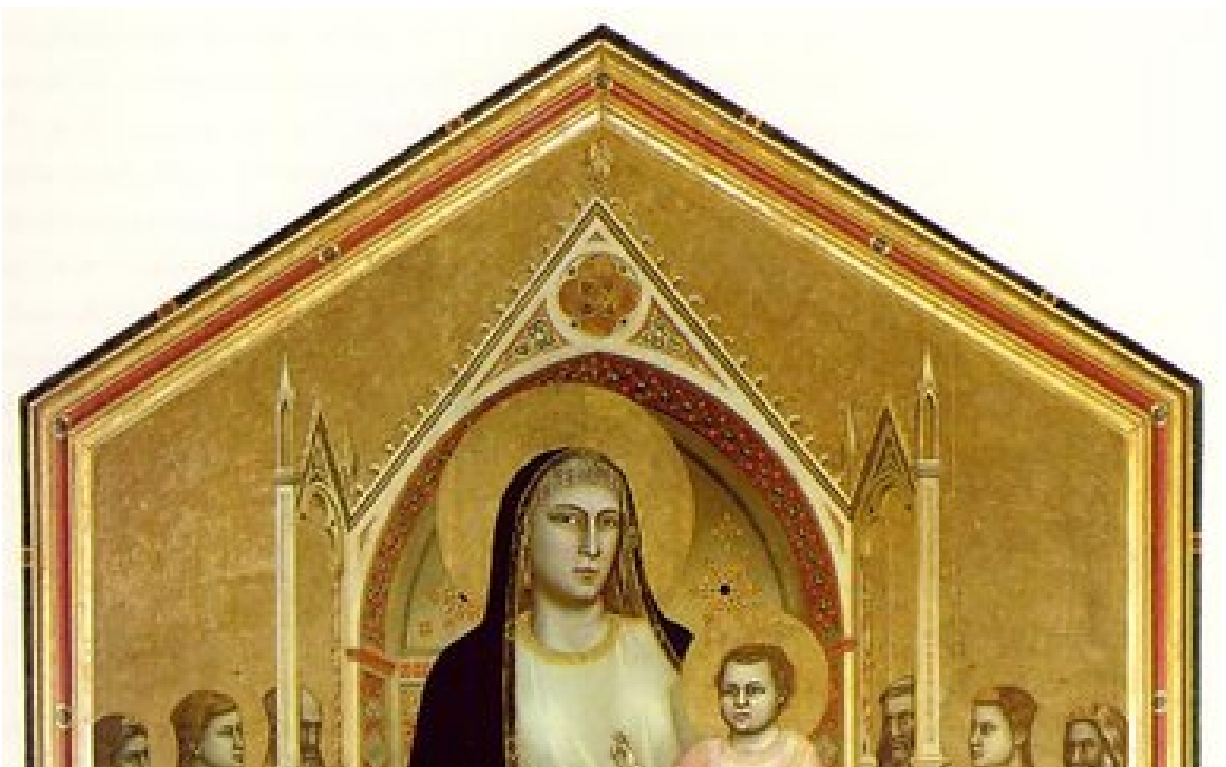
Madonna Enthroned by Giotto

1310 AD

Giotto is often considered the first Renaissance painter. Rather than emphasizing a style of painting, he turned to nature and painted by observance. His ability to do this successfully is largely attributed to his particular style, rather than the influence of a particular master.

Here, the Virgin Mary is enthroned, again, within Gothic-style architecture like in Cimabue's painting. However, the physical depiction is very different. There is a sense of a physical body under the clothing, and it's better articulated in this painting than it is in Cimabue's. There is also a truer feeling of space around and behind Mary's throne, along with the use of **modeling**.

Giotto was an accomplished artist, and was commissioned to create a number of notable works of art, including the **campanile** at the Florence Cathedral.

Here is a fresco from the Arena Chapel:

Arena Chapel fresco by Giotto

1305 AD

Fresco

Above is a great example of buon fresco, or paint applied to wet plaster, which worked quite well in the mild Mediterranean climate of Italy. It is something you wouldn't see in the cooler climates of northern Europe.

📄 TERMS TO KNOW

Modeling
In painting, the depiction of forms, particularly the human form, as having a rounded, three-dimensional shape, indicated by the use of shadows

Campanile
Usually freestanding, a bell tower

5. Siena and Florence Cathedrals

The Italian examples of Gothic architecture are quite unique compared to French Gothic architecture.

↗ EXAMPLE This example of Gothic architecture from the 13th century, the Siena Cathedral, offers the opportunity to compare the Italian Gothic style with the French.

Siena Cathedral

1215-1263 AD

Siena, Italy

In essence, it is a traditional cruciform-style church. The western façade shown here is quite large and magnificent, with a central rose window and a three-portal entrance. The design, however, is very ornate.

Notice the absence of the bell towers, or campaniles, attached to the façade. They have been pushed back toward the middle of the church. This creates a less imposing presence, and creates a more intimate feeling with the surrounding city.

↗ EXAMPLE Now compare it with the commanding presence of the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, France.

Notre Dame Cathedral

1163-1345 AD

Paris, France

The addition of the two bell towers up front makes for a dramatic change that dominates the surrounding landscape rather than integrating with it.

↱ EXAMPLE The final piece of architecture we'll look at is the famous Florence Cathedral.

Florence Cathedral

1436 AD

Florence, Italy

This cathedral combines elements of Gothic and Renaissance architecture. For example, the use of the pointed arch and ribbed vaulting are Gothic, but the overall design is more earthbound than vertical--actually, more horizontal than vertical.

Exterior of Florence Cathedral

The exterior is decorated in white, green, and pink marble in geometric designs rather than the elaborate sculptural programs of French Gothic cathedrals.

Interior of Florence Cathedral

The interior is also much more reserved and efficient in terms of its design. Again, notice the use of the ribbed vaulting and pointed arches.

Dome of Florence Cathedral

The dome clearly dominates the church, as it is tremendous in size. It was designed by the artist Brunelleschi, and it's considered one of the major achievements of the Renaissance. The artist Giotto was responsible for

the design of the campanile, shown toward the left side of the image. It has geometric patterns that reflect the exterior decoration of the church, but it is itself unattached to the church, and functions very much as its own structure.

SUMMARY

As the Renaissance began to develop over time, Late Gothic and Early Renaissance art was defined by these changes. In this lesson, you learned about the **period and location of Late Gothic and Early Renaissance** art. In doing so, you explored **the developing Renaissance**. Remember, the Renaissance did not start on a specific date, but instead developed over time.

Late Gothic art began to make attempts to perfect perspective in the two-dimensional visual arts. Italian Gothic art from this time also shows the continued influence of the Byzantine style, or maniera greco.

Cimabue and Giotto were two artists that made ground in Late Gothic and Renaissance art. The first artist to begin departing from the Byzantine style of Italian Gothic painting was the artist Cimabue, while Giotto is often referred to as the "Renaissance painter." Finally, you explored the **Siena and Florence Cathedrals**, both examples of the architecture of the time.

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TERMS TO KNOW

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