

Sixteenth-Century Northern Renaissance Painting

by Sophia



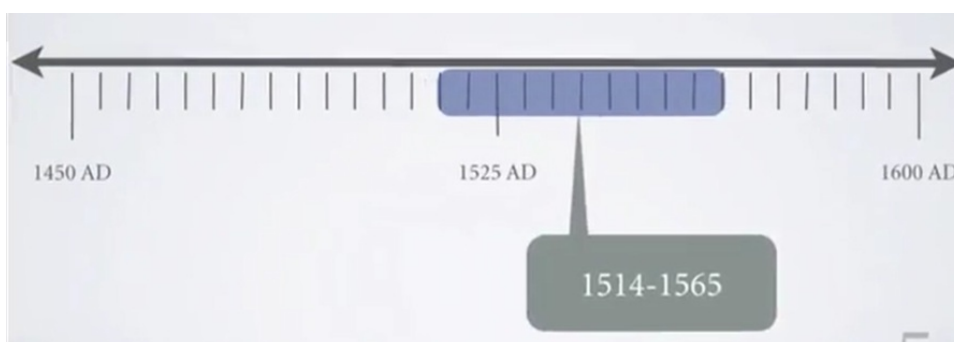
WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial covers 16th-century Northern Renaissance painting. By the end of this lesson, you'll be able to identify and define today's key terms, describe stylistic characteristics of the Northern Renaissance paintings from this time, and identify examples of 16th-century Northern Renaissance paintings. This will be accomplished through the exploration of:

1. Period and Location: 16th-Century Northern Renaissance Painting

The **Northern Renaissance** paintings of the 16th century were an amalgam of Northern-style symbolism, detail, and textural interests, with the influence of the Italian Renaissance elements of accurate perspective and logical compositions.

The artwork that you will be looking at today dates from between 1514 and 1565.



The artists whose work you'll be examining are from Northern Europe, originating from places such as Bree and Antwerp in modern-day Belgium, and Augsburg in modern-day Germany, shown below. Note that the purple area delineates the **Holy Roman Empire**.



TERMS TO KNOW

Northern Renaissance

An age of artistic and cultural discovery and Christian humanism that took place in Germany, the Netherlands, and France.

Holy Roman Empire

Consisting of mostly Germany and part of Italy but comprised of diverse ethnicities, this area was ruled by the Holy Roman Emperor from 962 to 1806. Its decline and eventual collapse coincided with the decline of the pope and the power of the emperor.

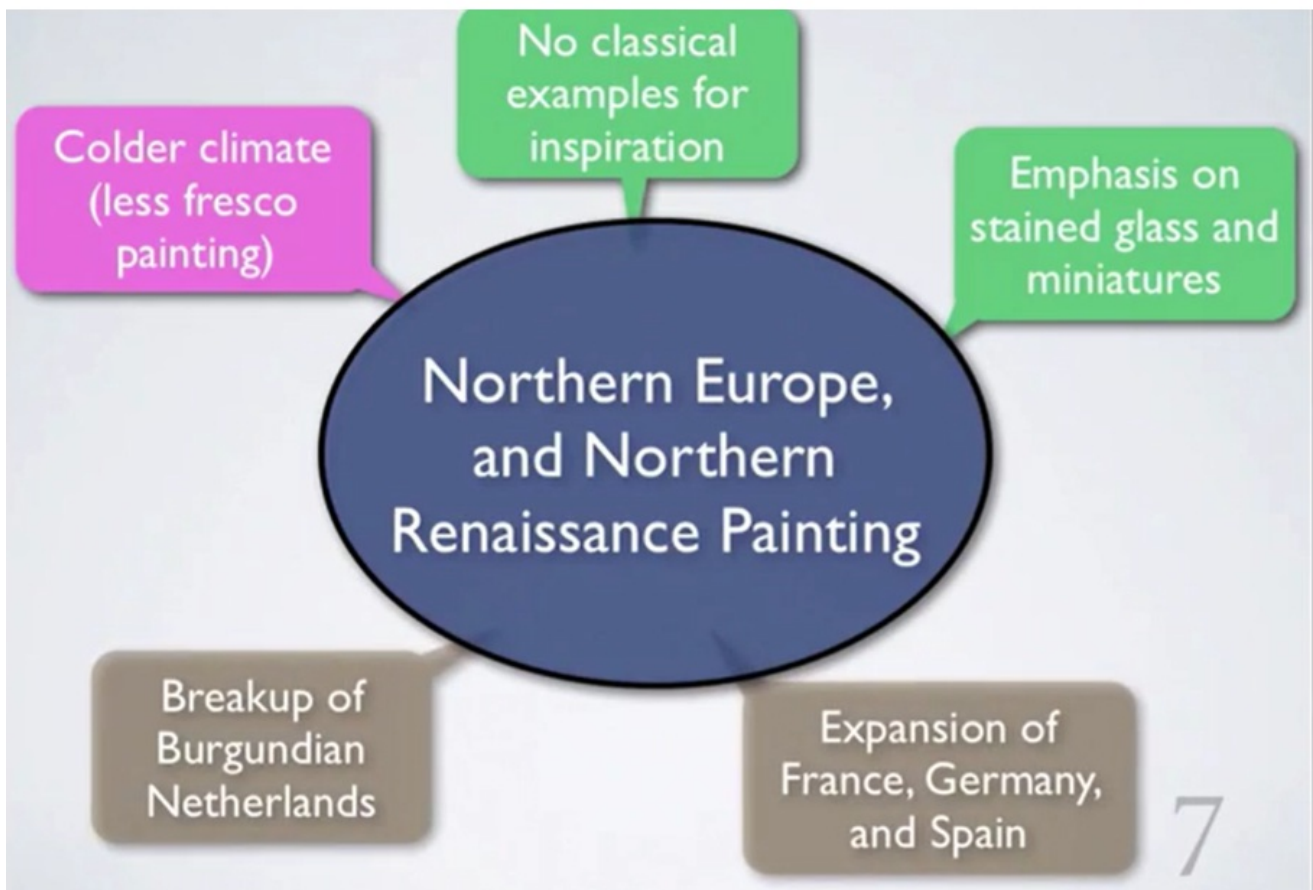
2. 16th-Century Northern Renaissance Painting: Influences and Stylistic Characteristics

It's important to remember that art often reflects or is influenced by the political climate of the time—as well as the *literal* climate of the time—as much as it is by the social trajectory.

The 16th century was a dynamic time in Northern Europe. The Protestant Reformation was beginning, thanks to a rebellious monk named Martin Luther. The artistic and sociopolitical climate of Northern Europe was being influenced by a number of major events:

- With the colder climate, there was less fresco painting, and therefore more panel painting
- There are no classical examples for inspiration.
- There is an emphasis on stained glass and miniatures.
- In terms of sociopolitical occurrences, the expansion of France, Germany, and Spain is taking place.

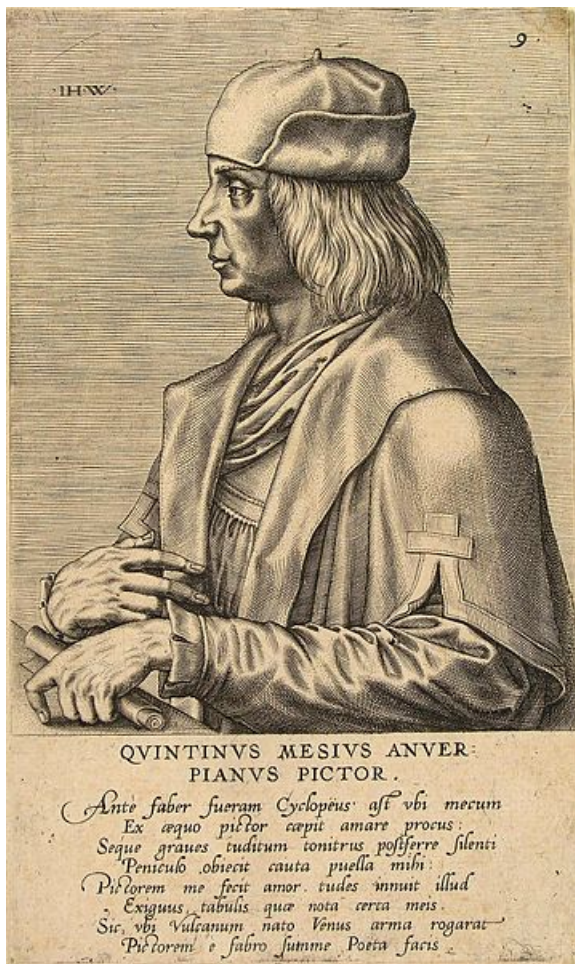
- The breakup of the Burgundian Netherlands was another sociopolitical event.



3. 16th-Century Northern Renaissance Painters and Their Artwork

3a. Quentin Massys

The artist Quentin Massys, shown in the image below, is believed to have begun his career as a blacksmith in his hometown of Leuven before taking up painting and moving to Antwerp, Flanders (modern-day Belgium), where he remained for the rest of his life until his death in 1529.



Quentin Massys

Massys' painting of "The Money Changer and His Wife" was almost certainly inspired by an earlier work by the Flemish painter Petrus Christus of a goldsmith in his shop, as well as the increased prosperity that was seen in the Netherlands and Flanders during this time.



The Money Changer and His Wife by Quentin Massys

1514

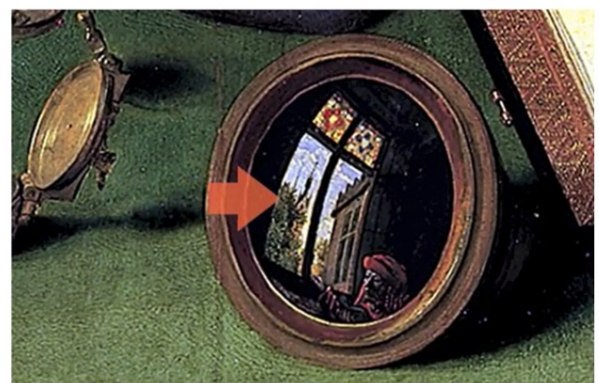
Oil on panel

In a typical Northern Renaissance fashion, this painting exemplifies a form of genre painting where the subject matter is something from everyday life. The man is carefully counting and weighing coins, while his wife flips through a book of hours, or illuminated manuscript.



THINK ABOUT IT

What do you think is the purpose of the painting? Well, the picture is filled with details that aren't immediately noticeable, such as the couple talking over the left shoulder of the wife (below, left) and the woman reading a book in front of a window, through which you see a church steeple, all reflected in a convex mirror on the desk (below, right).



It's in this mirror reflection that you may find the most important clue regarding the painting's meaning. As in van Eyck's painting of the Arnolfini wedding portrait, the convex mirror may be symbolic of the all-seeing eye of God. The church steeple in the background may be an indication of the subject matter contained in the book that the woman seated near the window is reading so intently. The overall theme likely suggests the daily struggle of remaining pious in a secular world.

3b. Hans Holbein the Younger

Hans Holbein the Younger—distinguished from, you guessed it, Hans Holbein the Elder—originated from the town of Augsburg in the Holy Roman Empire, in what is today the country of Germany. He was a very accomplished painter, having served the family of Anne Boleyn, and as the court painter for Anne Boleyn's husband, Henry VIII. Here is his self-portrait:



Self-portrait by Hans Holbein the Younger

1542

Augsburg, Holy Roman Empire (modern-day Germany)

While employed in England, Holbein created one of his most famous paintings, “The French Ambassadors.” Again, in typical Northern Renaissance style, the painting is full of symbolism. However, the influence of the Italian Renaissance is also evident in the careful application of perspective and the logical order of composition. The man on the left is Jean de Dinteville, the French ambassador to England, and the man on his right is his friend, Georges de Selve, a bishop and ambassador to the Catholic Holy See.



The French Ambassadors by Hans Holbein the Younger

1533

Oil on oak

The two men are 28 and 24, respectively, as evident in embossing on the dagger in Dinteville's right hand, as well as the writing on the Bible underneath de Selve's right arm. The fabrics are richly textured and realistically rendered, which is a hallmark of the Northern style of painting. Objects in the painting are either humanist or religious in their symbolism, and the most prominent object is the oddly placed and distorted skull.



DID YOU KNOW

Using a process called anamorphosis, the skull is an **anamorphic image** that is stretched in such a way that in order to view it correctly, the observer must stand to the side. It's an interesting addition and likely a reminder of human mortality, just in case you've forgotten.



TERM TO KNOW

Anamorphic Image

An image that appears distorted unless it is viewed from a certain angle or using a device, such as a mirror.

3c. Pieter Brueghel the Elder

One of the most well-known genre painters in Northern Europe was the painter, Pieter Brueghel the Elder, shown below in his self-portrait. Originating from Bree in modern-day Belgium, he began his career by imitating the style and subject matter of one of his greatest influences, the artist Hieronymus Bosch.



Self-portrait by Pieter Bruegel the Elder

1565

Bree, Habsburg Netherlands (modern-day Belgium)

He traveled to Italy during his lifetime and was particularly influenced by the landscape of the Italian countryside. He incorporated some of the Italian geography into his landscapes of Flanders, as is evident in this painting, titled “Hunters in the Snow.”



Hunters in the Snow by Pieter Bruegel the Elder

1565

Oil on wood panel

Now, although rolling hills exist in Flanders, mountains do not. This is a depiction of a rather uneventful scene—the return of hunters. However, Bruegel generates interest in the scene in the way he places his figures. The landscape is comprised of foreground and background only. There’s no middle ground, which serves to create a sensation of immediate expansion into the surrounding landscape. It’s a vantage point unique to the observer and an engaging juxtaposition of the daily routine against the backdrop of an expansive, beautifully detailed, Flemish **landscape**.



TERM TO KNOW

Landscape Painting

An artwork that uses scenes from nature, such as mountains, trees, lakes, and rivers.



SUMMARY

Today you learned about **16th-century Northern Renaissance painting**. You learned how to identify and define today’s key terms, and how to describe the **influences on and stylistic characteristics of the Northern Renaissance paintings** from this period. You also learned how to identify **examples of 16th-century Northern Renaissance paintings** by exploring the works of painters **Quentin Massys**, **Hans Holbein the Younger**, and **Pieter Bruegel the Elder**.

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Ian McConnell.



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