The Early Renaissance in Florence

by Sophia

The princely courts of Italy had a great impact on Italy's early Renaissance artwork. During this time, innovations in perspective and naturalism began to occur in works of art. This lesson covers:
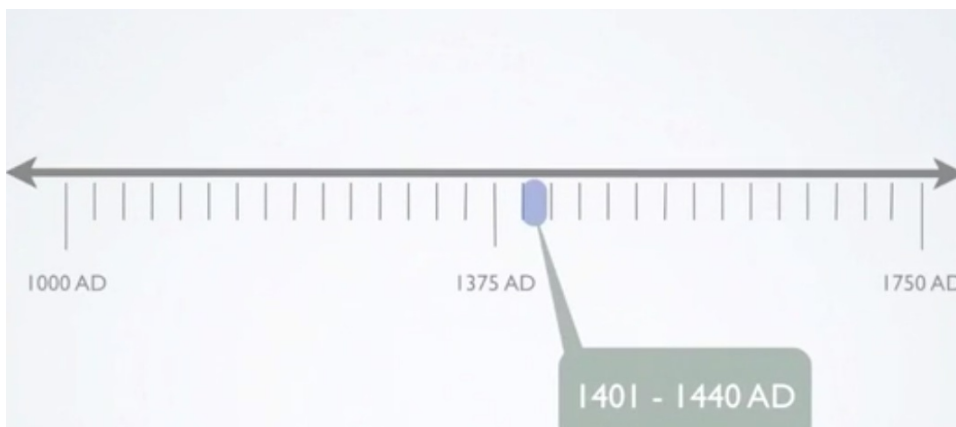
☆	BIG IDEA

The spread of humanism, a growing emphasis on individual achievement, and the princely courts of Italy were all highly influential on the early Renaissance artwork of Italy.

1. Period and Location: The Early Renaissance in Florence

This lesson focuses on 1401 to 1440 AD in Florence, Italy, as highlighted in the timeline below.

2. The Princely Courts of Italy

As this lesson begins, it is important to remember that Italy was not a kingdom at this time. There was no centralized power like there was in other areas of Europe. Instead, this area was made up of independent city-states, which were owned by the Church, or republics such as Florence and Venice.

"Term prince" was a term applied to a person in charge of one of those areas. A term prince could be, for instance, a duke or a count--not necessarily an actual prince. These term princes were often enormously wealthy and strong supporters of the arts, so much so that they were one of the main sources of artistic

patronage at this time.

→ EXAMPLE One example of a term prince is the Duke of Urbino, pictured below.

Portrait of Duke of Urbino by Piero della Francesca

1470

Tempera on wood

The resurgence of humanism during this time began to swing the pendulum away from the Byzantine style

and towards that of the classical style. Artists were interested in the **naturalism** and scientific rationalism that had developed in ancient Greece. These artists longed to apply it to the work that they were producing.

⊘ DID YOU KNOW

It was not just the artists, however, that were interested in naturalism and scientific rationalism. These ideas began to penetrate to all areas of culture and the arts. Artists' desire to utilize them was as prevalent as the patrons' desire to observe these styles. Eventually, the ideal of classical form and beauty that found a pairing with religious imagery of the time was rediscovered. This combination celebrated God's greatest creation, man, and humanity's devotion to its creator.

⊟ TERM TO KNOW

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. Panel Competition

By this time, nude form had essentially vanished from artwork of the Middle Ages. It was viewed as obscene and idolatrous, a relic of the pagan past. Within religious imagery, however, it could be reinterpreted as a depiction of innocence. The commission to create the baptistery doors in Florence was the prize given to the winner of a contest in which several artists were given the task of creating a bronze panel relief depicting the sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham.

This contest came down to two finalists, the artist Brunelleschi and the actual winner, the artist Ghiberti. While Ghiberti's submission was a much calmer depiction of the event, Brunelleschi's work displayed much dynamism.

↗ EXAMPLE Below is Brunelleschi's panel.

Sacrifice of Isaac Competition Panels by Brunelleschi

1401 AD

Bronze

You can see dynamic movement. Notice all the angels rushing in to stop Abraham from killing his son and Abraham's clothes flowing back as he rushes towards Isaac.

⤳ EXAMPLE Although there is still some sacrificing going on here, the panel below by Ghiberti is not as dynamic or energetic as the previous panel:

Sacrifice of Isaac Competition Panels by Ghiberti

1401 AD

Bronze

His rendering of Isaac as a male nude is particularly interesting. This could be the first example of a male nude since antiquity, which is a title usually given to the statue of David by the artist Donatello.

Ghiberti's winning is largely attributed to the artist's superior skill at casting compared to that of Brunelleschi. Brunelleschi went back to study architecture and eventually designed one of the most impressive domes in history, the dome of Florence Cathedral.

4. Masaccio

The mathematical description of perspective was undoubtedly influential on the artist Masaccio and his Holy

Trinity painting from the Church of Santa Maria Novella in Florence, Italy. Masaccio used his understanding of **linear perspective** to near perfection in how he essentially creates extremely realistic depth in his composition. The entire image is a painting, a fresco in fact, which is an important form of painting in Italy and a medium suitable to its mild climate. You wouldn't see fresco paintings in northern Europe.

↗ EXAMPLE   Below is an image of the Holy Trinity painting from the Church of Santa Maria Novella in Florence, Italy.

Holy Trinity by Masaccio

1427 AD

Fresco

The above image is divided into two sections. At the bottom is a crypt. The imagery and writing above it are a reminder of what is to come for all mankind. Above it are the patrons, a husband and wife kneeling and praying below the image of Christ crucified, flanked on either side by his mother Mary and by Saint John, and held by the image of God the Father. The **vanishing point** is below the feet of Christ, which is created with a series of **orthogonals**. This entire scene is fixed within a triumphal arch of sorts with a coffered barrel vaulted ceiling that recedes believably back into space.

> ⊘ **DID YOU KNOW**
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> It has actually been said that the overall mathematical execution of Masaccio's use of perspective is so precise that the virtual dimensions of the architecture that recedes into space can accurately be calculated.

> ▤ **TERMS TO KNOW**
>
> **Linear Perspective**
> A form of perspective in which the lines of manmade objects (roads, buildings) are at right angles to the picture plane and converge toward a vanishing point
>
> **Vanishing Point**
> The point on the horizon where the straight lines of linear perspective converge; the two sides of

a road appear to come together at the vanishing point.

Orthogonal
In mathematics, two lines or curves are orthogonal if they are perpendicular, or at right angles, at the point of intersection.

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5. Donatello

The artist Donatello is often credited with bringing back the male nude, specifically with his sculpture of David that was commissioned by members of the wealthy and influential Medici family to sit within their courtyard.

↱ EXAMPLE Here is the sculpture of David:

David by Donatello

1440 AD

Bronze

This sculpture is depicted as a youth standing in the Grecian contrapposto style with one hand on his sword, one hand on his hip and one foot on the severed head of Goliath. Notice here the return to naturalism that was so celebrated during the classical era. There is a clear understanding and deep appreciation for the mechanics of the human expressed in this sculpture.

↗ EXAMPLE The sculpture of St. Mark by Donatello was another impressive example of the artist's understanding of human form and human mechanics. Take, for instance, the contrapposto stance and perspective in the sculpture below:
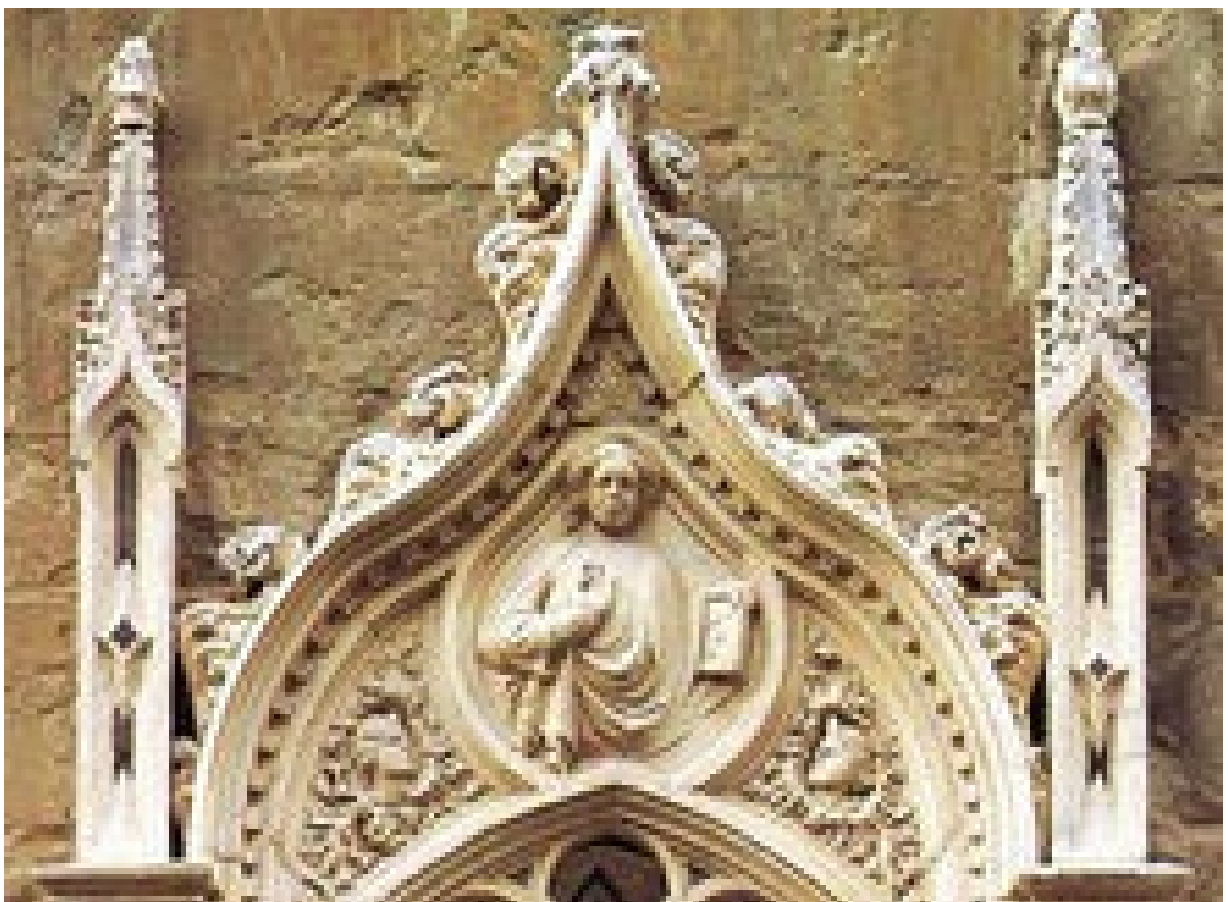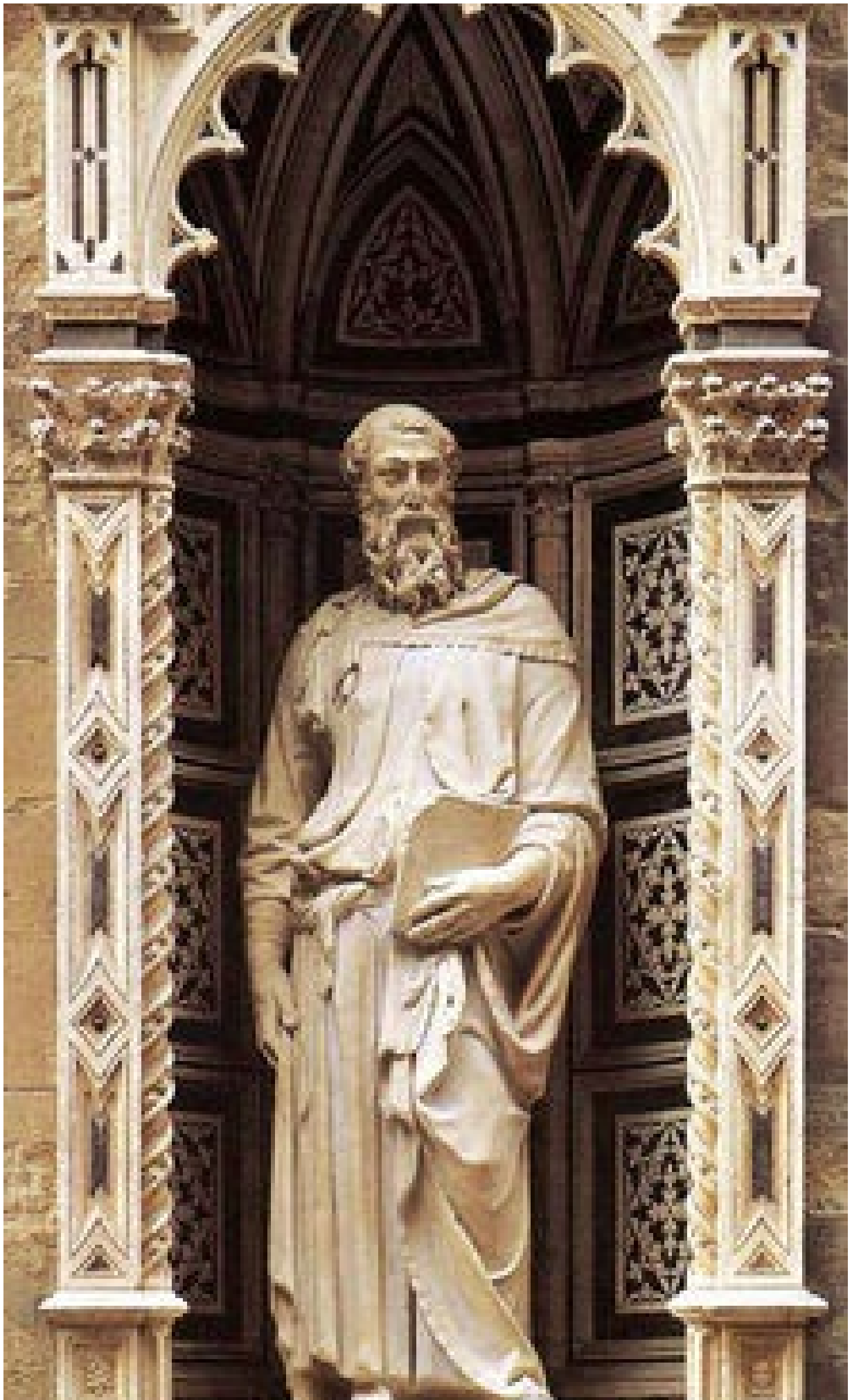
Saint Mark by Donatello

1411-1413 AD

Marble

⚙ THINK ABOUT IT

The realism is striking, for example, in the veins that can be seen in the hands of the saint. This is a realism that possibly was not repeated until later work by the artist Michelangelo.

Donatello mastered perspective, and he incorporates it into the proportions of the statue. It was intended to be viewed in a niche well above eye level, and so Donatello adjusted accordingly. From straight on, the statue looks slightly disproportionate, particularly with the head, but these adjustments were made so that from the original vantage point, where the person would be below the statue, the statue appears perfect.

☑ SUMMARY

Early Renaissance artwork of Italy had many influences, with one of the greatest being the princely courts of Italy. Artists began to use both perspective and naturalism in their works. In this lesson, you learned about the **period and location of the Early Renaissance in Florence.**

The princely courts of Italy were influential on artists and art of this time. These term princes were often enormously wealthy and strong supporters of the arts.

As the lesson went on, you learned about the **panel competition**. The commission to create the baptistery doors was the prize given to the winner of a contest in which several artists were given the task of creating a bronze panel relief depicting the sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham. The two finalists were Brunelleschi and Ghiberti. While Ghiberti's (winning) submission was a much calmer depiction of the event, Brunelleschi's work displayed much dynamism.

Finally, you explored the artists **Masaccio** and **Donatello**. Masaccio used his understanding of **linear perspective** to near perfection in his depiction of the Holy Trinity. The artist Donatello is often credited with bringing back the male nude. His sculpture of David that was commissioned by members of the wealthy and influential Medici family sat within their courtyard.

Source: THIS TUTORIAL WAS AUTHORED BY IAN MCCONNELL FOR SOPHIA LEARNING. Please see our

📄 TERMS TO KNOW

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