For many scholars and historians, the death of Dante Alighieri in 1321 marked the official end of the Middle Ages, an era marked distinctively by devout Catholicism and the subservience of man to God. However, with Florence and Rome flourishing in trade and textiles and an underlying dissatisfaction with corrupt Roman Catholic Church throughout Europe, a new zeitgeist slowly began to emerge, particularly in Italy. The corruption of the church led many people to acquire a newfound appreciation of the human form and to look back towards Antiquity, a period that stressed the values of human progress and potential, rather than God’s dominance and power. This Renaissance or “rebirth” of Greco-Roman culture inspired a new Humanistic view of the universe and a new “secular and scientific understanding of the physical world” (Benesch 7). Faith in human reason allowed for great scientific discovery and was accompanied by a restored interest in the liberal arts and “intellectual culture” based upon the “ideal of spiritual freedom and autonomy of the personality” (Benesch 54).

This new view of Renaissance individualism stressed the beauty of the human form and can be seen predominantly in the artwork produced from the early quattrocento to the mid-cinquecento in both Italy and Northern Europe alike. The art of the Renaissance is largely “based on the discovery of the world and of the self” (Harbison 8). Although great differences exist between the art of Northern Europe in the “Late Gothic” period (Murray 17) and that of Italy, overall development of new artistic techniques flourished, including the innovative use of perspective, depth, dramatic movement, fresco painting, and symmetry. These revolutionary techniques, due in large part to scientific and mathematical developments, enabled Renaissance artists to not only take a newfound pride in their accomplishments, but allowed them to represent drastically different—and many times secular—themes throughout...
their works: naturalism, humanism, realism, and classical Biblicalism, which stresses man’s relation to God, rather than his inferiority.

For Renaissance artists, a return to Christianity in its classical form paralleled the recreation of values from classical antiquity within their works of art. Renaissance humanist artists not only sought to “attack scholastic theology and return to the Biblical and patristic sources of Christianity” (Murray 11), but also to “give to an old religious content a new intensity and nearness to life” (Benesch 7). This thematic development intended to portray a relationship between man and God that was not hierarchical, but personal. Although this Biblical tradition began in Northern Europe with artists such as Albrecht Dürer in Germany, it quickly became a major trend in Italy as well, with even the most famous of artists, including Donatello and later Leonardo, painting Biblical scenes that depicted the relationship between man and God. In Michelangelo’s Creation of Adam, a portrait of man is represented in which the individual is endowed with extreme, even divine, potential and power. Adam is represented in the most beautiful, nude form and is given life and strength directly from the Creator. Captured in this painting is a moment in which “all the pride of pagan antiquity in the glory of the body, and all the yearning of Christianity for the spirit have reached a mysterious and perfect harmony” (Hartt 500). This masterpiece represents the collective consciousness of individuals throughout the Renaissance who criticized the “pomp and ceremonies that had grown up around the Church’s hierarchy” and sought to “return to the primitive beginnings of Christianity, with its emphasis on simple, egalitarian, and evangelical community” (Harbison 142). This attack on the dogmatism and corruptive licentiousness of the Roman Catholic Church stemmed also from the desire to return to the classical notions of Christianity where “belief is an inner experience which does not need sacred garments, tools, and places as outer tokens” (Benesch 60).

Dürer’s Man of Sorrows (Fig. 1) perfectly represents this inner religious experience that had slowly taken over the external institutionalization of the Church. The art of early 16th-century Germany, which acted as a mimesis of the Reformation that was rapidly transforming Europe, subliminally portrayed the emotional relationship between man and God (or Christ) that be-
came elevated through God’s grace and faith alone. This style symbolizes the “ardent desire of the leading spirits to find an immediate way to God, to justify themselves through the strength of their belief instead through ecclesiastic formulas” (Benesch 22). In this painting, Durer reveals his inner emotional distress caused by Christ’s suffering. The divine Christ, who “bears Durer’s own features” (Benesch 22), shows the expression of tragic sorrow that has so heavily impacted Durer’s own human psyche. These trends of Classic Biblicalism combined with a spiritual and emotional connection between man and the divine define a large aspect of Renaissance art, in which human beings have entered an inward spiritual quest for religiosity outside of the church, while also being depicted as a paradigm of beauty, first exemplified in classical antiquity, where man himself takes on a godly appearance.

One of the main secular artistic movements born from the Renaissance was the development of what came to be known as naturalism, or

Figure 1: Albrecht Durer. *Christ as the Man of Sorrows* (detail). 1493. Oil on panel. Staatliche Kunsthalle.
“landscape imagery” (Hartt 280). This technique, which was used by both Northern European and Italian artists alike, represents a new purpose taken on by artists of the time: to focus on “issues and ideas that had their origin and purpose outside the confines of the Church—in the daily, worldly existence of contemporaries, in their intellectual life, and in their discovery of the world through exploration and commerce” (Harbison 124). This revolutionary turn towards secularity is due, in large part, to the Reformation and the ubiquitous dissatisfaction with the Catholic Church. Depicting the landscape enabled artists to imagine and create an “ideal space” and a “complete illusion of a new world” (Murray 40). By painting the perfect place (locus amoenus), artists were not only able to make use of new artistic trends such as depth perception and perspective, but were also able to place themselves and the viewer in a somewhat imaginary utopian world that existed outside of the corruption and religious fraudulence of the time period. Although landscape paintings are generally regarded as a form of secular art, many of the works contain some form of Christian or Protestant theme or narrative subtly interwoven within them. This feature stems predominantly from an “understand[ing] of the universe as an embodiment of God” (Benesch 42) where a Divine Creator is believed to be responsible for the creation of the natural world in all its beauty. This Renaissance pantheism is notable in the works of German artist Joachim Patinir, particularly Landscape with St. Jerome (Fig. 2). This painting depicts a solitary Jerome taming a lion in the wilderness, representing man’s peaceful relationship with the natural world. Jerome has retreated to “face his inner demons” (Harbison 138), depicted through the dark clouds in the upper left corner. The theme of saints or pilgrims “going into a harsh world in order to restore their sense of purpose and ideals” (Harbison 144) became a humanistic way of showing the power of nature to restore and give life to a deteriorating society like that of the Holy Roman Empire. The use of color progression from dark to light also allows for a sense of recession. By creating such a complex, diverse landscape, Patinir is able to depict a setting representative of a place anyone would be willing to journey through because of its beauty and sense of eventual serenity.

The Italian painter Piero Francesca portrayed similar themes in his works,
Figure 2, top: Joahim Patinir. *Landscape with St. Jerome* (detail). c.1515-24. Oil on wood. Museo del Prado.

Figure 3, bottom: Piero della Francesca. *Allegorical Triumph of Federico da Montefeltro* (detail). ca. 1465. Oil on panel, 47 x 33 cm. Galleria degli Uffizi.
but is more notable for his incorporation of scientific and mathematical developments within his art. This is essentially the technique that most distinguishes Northern Renaissance art from that of Italy. As for Piero’s *Triumph of Federico da Montefeltro* (Fig. 3), the rate at which the conical hills fade into the distance and the rate at which “their intersection with the plain vanishes” represents this plane as “part of the surface of a sphere” (Hartt 282). Piero’s rationale for this is undeniably his desire to incorporate the revolutionary scientific idea of the time that the world was round. This notion is further supported by the fact that Piero was acquaintances with Paolo Toscanelli, who drew the map Columbus used to make this theoretical speculation factual. In general, it can be said that landscape art throughout the Renaissance sought to represent a realistic world that made use of the scientific and mathematical discoveries of the age on one hand, and an idealistic, imaginary world where people could find inner solace outside of the corruption of the Church on the other.

Along with the creation of landscape paintings came a continuous development of a type of artwork that art historians now call Realism. Visual realism refers to the artists “ability to mimic . . . the myriad effects of color and light to be seen in the visible world . . . as if the eyes of the artists had suddenly been opened” (Harbison 26). Although much more complex in its application, realism strived to accomplish two tasks: to “render solids according to how objects are seen in light and space” and to “describe the observable factual data of nature” (Wohl 9). This desire to accurately portray the natural world was also accompanied by the fervent craving to “represent the human body in a more realistic way than any practiced since classical antiquity” (Murray 17). The various approaches taken by Northern European artists and Italian artists mark the most distinct differences in artistic developments during the Renaissance. These differences primarily deal with the styles, ornaments and techniques that began developing in the 15th century and culminated in the High Renaissance. The major difference that existed between Italian and Northern realism was the former’s emphasis of perspective and mathematical precision. While Italian art was more generally focused on “regularity and clarity,” Northern art leaned more heavily towards a representation of “miniature, texture, and illusion” that incorporated imaginative and personal experiences and an “enclosed

Figure 5: Rogier van der Weyden. *St. John Altarpiece* (multiple details). c.1455-1460. Oil on panel. Gemaldegalerie.
world of privacy and preciousness” (Harbison 34).

One of the most famous artists to stand out among Italians who perfected the use of spatial representation and perspective was Pietro Perugino. In his *Giving of the Keys to St. Peter* (Fig. 4), an uncanny sense of openness and depth of field is obtained through the use of spatial techniques and mathematical meticulousness. This painting provides a “refreshing sense of liberation from material restraints, as if the spectator could glide freely in any direction” (Hartt 359). This use of perspective involves “using a mathematical theory according to which all lines perpendicular to the picture plane converge toward a single vanishing point, and figures or objects are placed in regular and diminishing scale along those orthogonals” (Harbison 32). The symmetry of the classically designed buildings and the sense of mathematically produced depth and third dimension is what distinctively differentiates Italian Renaissance art from the flatness and artificialness of Northern Europe and even, to an extent, the previous religious works of the Middle Ages. The inclination towards spatial precision and perspective was in large part due to the “admiration for naturalistic rendering of detail” prevalent in Greco-Roman culture and brought along with it the adoption of “classically derived humanistic architectural vocabulary” (Wohl 161).

While Italian realism was individualized and “style-conscious,” Northern European Renaissance art generally took the form of “distorted introversion—spaces, private and enclosed” where the artist strove “for their own kind of ideal representation” (Harbison 33) of a magical world. This imaginative form was oftentimes subjected to much criticism from Italian artists who saw the art as dull and irrational. Michelangelo once said Northern art was painted “without reason or art, without symmetry or proportion, without skill, selection or boldness and, finally, without substance or vigor” (Harbison 155). However, what remain as outstanding aspects of Northern art are the intricate depictions of details, textures, and contrasts between areas of light and dark. Rogier van der Weyden’s *St John’s Altarpiece* (Fig. 5) is an apt prototype of this Northern disposition. Depicted are three scenes from the life of John the Baptist which take place indoors, with windows that provide a glimpse into the outer world. This distinctively Northern European technique was in
stark contrast to the Italian “brilliant, open, sunlight piazza effect” (Harbison 134) in which the beauty and realism of the outer natural world were depicted, as opposed to the Northern “love of fragmentation and detail.” In Weyden’s piece, this fragmented realism is clearly evident as the multiple stages of John’s life “draw the viewer into an imagined world and make the viewer aware of its illusionist nature” (Harbison 39). This view of the world was also heavily influenced by the philosophy of nominalism, which states that anything a person can truly know is directly perceivable through the senses. Thus, through the use of the senses, an artist is able to focus upon the intricate details of specific objects, people, and places. Again, this devotion to detail and fragmented reality was what set Northern European art apart from the holistic realism and mathematical precision of Italy.

All of the artistic developments discussed previously culminated in a period known as the High Renaissance in Italy and as the Late Gothic period in the North. Starting in 1500, the Renaissance would reach a climax of artistic genius that featured an honor roll of innovative painters such as Michelangelo, Raphael, Titian, Leonardo da Vinci, and Botticelli. What was born was a
renowned representation of the human being in its most beautiful form along with a combination of Italian perspective, symmetry, and harmony, Northern detail, and the representation of Gods, historical events, and unforgettable legends of classical antiquity. These themes were oftentimes painted in the “ornate classical style” (Wohl 115), traditionally known as fresco painting. Since artists generally painted large works, they developed a technique of using wet plaster that enabled them to transfer cartoons, or original drafts, of the paintings onto ceramic where it would then dry. The style of these frescoes was developed by pupils of Raphael in the early 1500s who had as their general aim “verisimilitude in the representation of the classical roman past” (Wohl 118). It is this very technique that Michelangelo used to cover the Sistine Chapel with his magnificent portraits of biblical scenes.

Most people know about Leonardo’s remarkable discoveries regarding the human body and how he and Michelangelo depicted the human form throughout their works, but two marginally less well-known paintings are left to be discussed. The first of these is Giorgione’s Sleeping Venus (Fig. 6). Most noticeable here is the depiction of the nude human being, who “shining in the soft light [represents] the full perfection of human beauty” (Hartt 592). Where Renaissance art differs dramatically from the Middle Ages is in the portrayal of the “human being as a living organism” (Benesch 17) flourishing in its innocent nudeness. Just as important in this painting (finished by Titian) is the image of the Greek Goddess Venus, representing the Renaissance rebirth of classical culture. It was the “rise of secular education, coupled with the tendency to equate knowledge with Latin and Greek literature—that is, Humanism that led to a demand for such pictures” (Murray 278). Venus, curved perfectly in relation to the earth, rests in calm serenity in the midst of a natural landscape and, consequently, idealizes the ultimate topos of Renaissance art.

The final painting left to discuss combines both the eloquence of mathematical precision and spatial techniques of the Renaissance and the architectural and thematic traditions of classical antiquity. This is, of course, Raphael’s School of Athens (Fig. 7). This painting is the culmination of all High Renaissance artistry. In the direct center of the painting stand Plato and Aristotle; Plato points upwards as he describes his theory of universal forms, while Aris-
totle points down, relating his earthly, practical moral philosophy as he carries a copy of the Nichomachean Ethics. To the left Socrates engages in philosophical argument, with other notable mathematicians such as Pythagoras and Euclid are distributed throughout the painting. On the bottom, with his left elbow resting on a slab of marble, is Michelangelo (Hartt 510). This amalgamation of worldly philosophers, scholars, and artists represents the renewed interest in humanism, the liberal arts, and classical education throughout the Renaissance. As artists began to drift away from the dogmatism of the Catholic Church, they turned toward the intellectualism so often stressed by classical philosophers to be the best and happiest possible life. This painting also represents a remarkable representation of space and classical architecture. The series of arches, receding into what seems like infinite distance, is flanked by nude sculptures. Even more astonishing is Raphael’s ability to incorporate such a large amount of people within one area, something unprecedented in the history of art. Regardless of the number of people within the room, Raphael’s mastery of the perspective technique almost forces the viewers eyes towards the center, where two of the greatest thinkers of antiquity stand in pensive reflection, symbolizing the new scholarly and classical consciousness that had pervaded the Renaissance for over two-hundred years.

Works Referenced


