

## What were the main characteristics of early Renaissance paintings?

There are a number of characteristics attributed to Early Renaissance paintings, the most common-place and obvious of these being their subject matter. In all early Renaissance painting, religious events or icons or Greek and Roman myths play a large role. This was because it was not until the mid-renaissance that anyone other than the church was rich enough to commission paintings.

Both symbols and real-life events were represented together in the same works. This combination was common during the Early Renaissance in Flanders (1400-1500). Oil paint was used for the first time. Prior to this point, egg tempera was the medium of choice.

Naturalism is another important characteristic. It portrays a realistic observation of the natural world e.g. peoples faces express real emotions (contrary to idealism which portrays an 'ideal' observation of the natural world). Examples of character naturalism are 1) The shivering men illustrated in Masaccio's 'Baptism of Neophytes' (in an idealistic painting the men would not show any signs of being cold whatsoever) and the ear of another man whose ear has been bent over by his turban, 2) Francesca's 'Nativity', in which the strange figure of St Joseph is nonchalantly sitting on a saddle, and the two animals in the background adopt natural poses and expressions. Examples of scenery naturalism are 1) The ripples in the water depicted by Masaccio in 'Tribute Money', 2) The naturalistic folds of material (especially Mary's blue cloak) in both Masaccio's 'Pisa Altarpiece' and in Piero della Francesca's 'Nativity'. 3) The illustration of a specific season in Masaccio's, 'The tribute money'.

Early Renaissance paintings sometimes make reference to neoclassical architecture. A Good example of this are 1) Masaccio's 'The Trinity', in which the architectural columns from which Christ is being crucified from, take the form of the classical orders. 2) Piero della Francesca's 'Nativity', in which the people depicted take poses associated with Greek statues.

Many Early Renaissance paintings use single light sources. Examples of this are Masaccio's 'Pisa Altarpiece' and his frescos in the Brancacci chapel which tell the story of Saint Peter, most notably 'Peter Healing with his Shadow', in which Masaccio uses the single light source to allow Peter's shadow to be created through the concept of naturalism (realism).

Perspective is one of the most important themes that define Early Renaissance paintings. The same rules of perspective are used in the great majority of the paintings that we know of, this rule being that single point perspective is used, combined with great depth (people and places were shown in three dimensions. Renaissance painters employed a method known as *chiaroscuro*. *Chiaroscuro* (the balance of light and dark) was for the first time shown within a picture, depicting three-dimensional objects through employing the use of shadows in preference to the previous norm of using harsh, blocky outlines.

The first public display of single point perspective in the Renaissance was in 1420 with Donatello's 'St George Relief'. Although this is not a painting, it is this relief which sparks off the popular usage of single point perspective in early Renaissance paintings, starting with 'The Trinity', by Masaccio (and later notably 'Tribute Money', which exploits single point perspective in order to lead the vanishing point to Jesus' hand). As this was the first painting to use such immense depth (to illustrate the length of the vaulting behind Christ), audiences were amazed that such a concept had been successfully passed from stonework to paintings. This had the result of influencing the large majority of the paintings produced during the early Renaissance (and onwards), most notably those produced by Paul Ucello (The most famous of his works being 'Hunt at Night' and 'The Deluge', in which the lines lead to the painting's vanishing point) and Piero della Francesca (The most famous of his works being 'The Flagellation of Christ', in which lines divide different time perspectives).