

To what extent did the context and achievements of the Northern Renaissance differ from those of the Italian Renaissance?

The Northern Renaissance developed about 100 years after the Italian Renaissance and will therefore show some similar characteristics. This is partly due to creative adaptation, as the achievements of the Italian Renaissance were not simply plagiarised by the Northern Renaissance, but adapted and reformed to suit their own needs and context. Artists in Flanders, Holland and West Germany began experimenting with new techniques and themes with the same humanistic enthusiasm as their Italian counterparts. The art of the Northern Renaissance however had distinct differences that developed around the use of oil paints and shading that made their work individual. This is an example of how a prominent similarity encompasses many differences between the two Renaissances.

Contextually the Northern and Italian Renaissance share some common factors, one being that both flourished in the most urbanized areas of Europe. Bruges had a thriving cloth making industry that was reflected in the intricately painted cloths in such paintings as Madonna with Canon George Van der Paele, and shows these prosperous cities were celebrated by their inhabitants. This urbanization came about due to the prosperous economic conditions at the time of both Renaissances. It was an important factor as it allowed a flow of investment into art and other cultural pursuits. The trades people, artisans and workers played an important role in both renaissances by creating the consumer boom in culture. This also meant there was a greater variety of patronage and from a wider social spectrum.

The citizens of the republican cities of Italy were proud of their political system as it meant they ruled themselves. The, "Allegory of Good Government," is the great fresco painted for Sienna town hall by Lorenzetti, which is a perfect example of civic pride as it, show s every day life with the city at the center of this life. Civic pride is also true of the cities of the north such as Bruges. This is reflected in the amount of paintings that contain views of the cities and its great landmarks. " Virgin Among Virgins in a Rose Garden," has a beautiful and glorifying portrait of Bruges as its background and includes the cities landmarks; the Church of Notre Dame and the town Belfry, both that demonstrate local urban pride.

The Medici family of Florence shows how the upper middle classes were patrons of the arts as a sign of status and a mark of civic pride. " The Procession of Magi," shows a Romanesque scene with members of the Medici family riding immediately behind the king. The, "Virgin and Child before a Fire Screen," by Campin is a piece if bourgeois middle class Northern art that shows the Virgin Mary, usually a much glorified subject matter in an ordinary

middle class context that follows the fashions of the time with the woman wearing the contemporary clothing style.

In Italy many of the cities were self-governed republics however in the North the monarchical institute was still prevalent. Which was reflected in the subject matter of the Melin Diptych by Jean Foquet that shows the king's personal minister praying next to the virgin Mary. Illustrating how art was used as courtly propaganda and that courtly patronage was centered around the members of the Burgundian court and government of Dijon.

The Italian renaissance saw a curiosity of their ancestors develop along with a re-birth of classical ideals. They would have been motivated towards this by the classical ruins of Italy. This classic mania did not hit the north with any where near the same impact as they had no point to relate to as the Italians did with the classical ruins. In Italy many artists used classical subject matter such as Botticelli in, "The Birth of Venus," which celebrates Roman mythology. It also illustrates the re-birth of the ancient ideal of beauty with the body of Venus having a curvaceous figure. Without this significant history the Northern Renaissance was influenced by it's Gothic past as can be particularly seen in the amount of detail applied to paintings. In Van Eyck's, "Adoration of the Mystical lamb," where every blade of grass has been painstakingly painted is similar to the technique used for art of the Gothic era.

Religious art of the North tended to be more dramatic often showing very disturbing scenes or images as in the Isenheim Altarpiece. Grunewald's melodramatic scene is a realistic representation of suffering and pain as any. This explicit painting shows the diseased body of Christ with his skin torn and crown of thorns piercing into his head. Upon entering the monastery at Isenheim patients would be shown this as a gesture of devotion and piety this became a distinct purpose of religious art in the north. Paintings of the Italian Renaissance were relatively calmer and were not such vivid depictions of suffering.

In both Renaissances the search for greater realism was equal as the artists sought to depict true representations of what they saw. The figure of St George by Donatello shows how realism could be portrayed in a light fresh way. By contrast Donatello shows it is possible to also produce the viciously realistic with his relief of, "Herod's Feast," at Siena Cathedral. This is a marked difference from the dainty and delicate artwork of the Middle Ages, which was ordered and sterilized such gruesome passages. The realism is almost sadistic, showing the executioner kneeling before a horrified Herod, his evil wife is shown rationalizing the murder. The greater realism employed in the Italian Renaissance can also be seen in art of the north and especially in sculptures such as the, "Well of Moses." Carved by Claus Sluter the realism is intense as each of the faces is completely individual, life like and powerfully expressive.

Each Renaissance however took on its own definition of real. In Italy artists used the ideal of beauty passed on from the classics while further north artists used portraits of real people to gain that sense of realism. The intense realism of Claus Sluter's, "Well of Moses," came from the real life portraits of people, which he took while focusing on the study of a powerful, expressive realism. Massaccio's, "The Expulsion," of Adam and Eve shows their harrowing expressions and from this his directness of style that provides this painting with its realism. Massaccio has used a classical ideal of beauty by having Adam as a tall, well-toned man and Eve with large hips and a curvaceous figure. Their facial expressions expose their guilt and despair whilst the shadows almost engulf Adam and suggest a forward movement.

Realism was approached in different ways in each Renaissance. The Italian Renaissance took on a mathematical method known today as perspective. The achievement of his mathematical model was a great aid to appearance of reality as it helped to convey space and proportion. In Massaccio's, "The Holy Trinity, the Virgin, St. John and Donors," instead of being a static scene it shows a realistic transept chapel in Brunelleschi's new style using perspective. Northern painters did not take up the innovation of using perspective, as they did not have the perception that art should follow classical harmony. In contrast they used detail to add realism, as in Jan van Eyck's, "The Arnolfini Portrait," in which we can see the chandelier is too far down in the room but added as a detail to symbolize the couple's wealth. In paintings the fascination with detail served the purpose of giving a greater insight into the couple's relationship, such as the dusting brush in the bedstead that highlights the woman's household responsibilities. A house built between 1443 – 1453 by a powerful financial minister to the king of France shows how architecture in the north did not follow these rules as the left hand side of the building is considerably more built up. It does not follow the rules of proportion or balance compared to Brunelleschi's dome at the Florence cathedral in which we can see a great contrast as it follows the classical rules of harmony and balance in every way. Art of the North also tended to be fragmentarily realistic as their work often lacked unity such as Roger van Weyden's, "St John Altarpiece." The three panels are of different scenes that bear no relation to each other. The architectural form of the arch ties the painting together however the receding architectural background differentiates the panels. The painting reveals the northern love of detailed description and the refusal to simplify any more.

The boundary that stood between northern and Italian Renaissance art was the difference between subject matter and the style of realism. However Albrecht Durer, a leading German artist of the time, dissolved these boundaries in the search for a system of ideal proportions to use to represent the human body. Like the Italian artist Piero della Francesca who used pure geometrical shapes to construct the, "Baptism of Christ," and so it was in tune with the classical ideal of harmony. In, "Adam and Eve," Durer used Italian classical ideals by modeling Adam on an ancient statue of Apollo and Eve on Venus; in northern

art this was rare image of physical perfection. This work encompasses northern tradition as well by the numerous amount of details displayed such as the cat, rabbit, elk, and ox that all have a symbolic meaning often used in northern art.

The closing of these boundaries however was not that wide spread and there still remained the majority of differences. There can be many similarities drawn between the Northern and Italian Renaissance such as that they both flourished in the most urbanized areas of Europe where consumerism and a taste for the arts had grown. This consumerism and rising prosperity meant patronage could now also come from the urban middle classes as well as from merchants and guilds, which was a factor of both Renaissance. On the other hand the North had a separate source of patronage from the monarchy that led to courtly patronage. In Italy there are classical and republican influences, this is celebrated in art like Botticelli's, "Birth of Venus," with her classical curvaceous figure. Realism, dimension and shadow are the joint achievements of the Renaissance. They sought to create a realistic vision that can be seen in a variety of art from north to south. In the, "School of Athens." Raphael combines proportion and perspective to give an Italian Renaissance definition of realism whilst Van Eyck uses a mass of detail for a northern example. In the south art had a more calmer outset that stemmed from painting with water based paints on walls, instead of using oil paints on wood as they did in the north that meant their paintings were often richer and stronger in colour. Even though there are many differences it would be unreasonable to go as far as some art historians and say that what occurred in the north was totally separate from the Renaissance and call it International Gothic. As there are distinct similarities, that may be lesser, but do suggest they did not happen in isolation and at some point north and south did meet as Albrecht Durer shows in, "Adam and Eve," by combining a northern subject matter and the Italian style of realism.