

How innovative were Brunelleschi, Donatello and Masaccio in pioneering a distinctive new art style in Florence during the first half of the fifteenth century?

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Art in Renaissance Florence certainly marked a departure from the previous style that was seen during the Middle Ages, so named by Renaissance artists because they saw this period as a 'dark age' between the classical style they so admired and the rebirth of art that the Renaissance encouraged. New ideas based on the classical artistic thinking inspired a group of Florentine artists who were desperate to break away from the international Gothic style and revive classical technique, either for personal motives, as Gombrich believes, or because of the desires of their patrons. The gothic that this group was so opposed to was actually quite a beautiful form, inspired by the artists' observation of delicacy and beauty. The previously illusive quality of religious works was replaced by historical accuracy and for the first time research was required in order to paint a faithful reconstruction. Blinded by their desire to destroy all things Gothic, which they saw as the barbaric artistic style, named Gothic because the Goths led to the downfall of the Roman Empire, this group of artists were unable to recognise many aspects of the international Gothic style as the starting points of their own work.

Brunelleschi was undoubtedly one of the leaders of this group and it is telling that his first major achievement was to be employed to complete that Gothic masterpiece, the Florentine cathedral. He was the only architect capable of creating a *cupola* that could cover such a large area with pillars. His work on this cathedral ironically inspired him to vow that his subsequent architectural works would be influenced by the classical era. As a result, Brunelleschi spent much of his time studying Roman ruins to gain inspiration. However, he decisively did not stick to the Roman formulas, instead choosing to take these forms as his stimulus for creating new beauty. The Roman Parthenon unmistakably influenced his most famous work, the Duomo, while his other works have distinct Roman touches, such as the columns of the Innocenti foundling hospital. His grey and white hallmark colour scheme had never been seen before, and his creation of a mathematical perspective system were indeed revolutionary but to say that he was the first artist to consider human perspective would be a mistake, as toward the end of the Middle Ages, there was evidence of artists paying greater attention to physical accuracy and the human form. Brunelleschi was, however, the defining figure when discovering perspective in art. His famed experiment, where he painted an incredibly accurate picture of the baptistery of San Lorenzo, amazed and confused passer-bys that he showed the painting.

Brunelleschi's mathematical rules set a precedent for painter such as Masaccio, who expanded these rules to paint his illusionistic and revolutionary wall-painting in St Maria Novella which included three dimensional perspectives along with heavy, correctly-proportioned figures that represented a departure from the classical religious figures which were shown as graceful and so light that it would have been impossible to see an actual human with such dimensions. Libero de Liberi told us that Masaccio 'worked the miracle of awakening in paintings, breathing life into it at last real and earthy, an urgency it had never had before.' By this he means that Masaccio was certainly revolutionary in his new style of painting, and this style was extremely

influential on Florentine arts. Masaccio himself was inspired by Brunelleschi and Donatello, which tells us a lot about the influence of these artists. He combined Brunelleschi's perspective and Donatello's sense of intense humanity to create a picture of Man as an authentic individual, with passions and feelings.

It was Masaccio's new ideas and combination of Brunelleschi and Donatello's ideas that led him to renovate the state of Florentine painting, which he recognised as stale and unoriginal. He took inspiration from the new ideas in sculpture and architecture to turn the Gothic style of painting around and this is why he is universally considered the 'founder of Renaissance Art'. His *Cappella Brancacci frescoes* are a perfect example of his concentration on the naturalistic revolution: to see space through the laws of perspective and his deep emotive intensity. Similarly, *La Trinita* is a work with a pictorial perspective that gives the illusion of space that does not actually exist. These illusionistic tricks are the trademark of Masaccio and he combined the works of his two friends, Donatello and Brunelleschi to create a truly innovative new art style. With this new art style, he influenced later artists such as Leonardo, Michelangelo and Raffaello, all of whom took pains to carefully reproduce the theory of perspective and use them in their own work.

Donatello was the first sculptor to completely abandon the Gothic principles. His studies of the human body and its exact dimensions were the starting point for his distinctively energetic and vigorous sculpture which completely defied all previous sculpting rules, where figures were seen as elegant and gentle. We can see the alteration of his style throughout his career by contrasting the two statues of *David* that he created. The first (*David 1409*), although distinctly by Donatello, still bore the hallmarks of the international Gothic style, while *David of 1430* was a devastatingly handsome bronze figure with definite homo-erotic undertones, what with the feather seen to be sensuously tickling his inner thigh. He has also referred back to the classical period with this figure, as it was the first freestanding nude since those times. Without doubt, Donatello used a model for this statue as he had a tendency to do, which again is a very classical technique. Like Brunelleschi, Donatello was reported to have studied classical works of art and ruins, which spurred him on to study nature and the human body in order to gain a more definite accuracy and independence. These studies were the sign of Donatello promoting a classical revival, the definition of the word *Renaissance*. However, his classical study was betrayed by his later works, which show frenzied figures in unusually demented poses, such as his statue of *Mary Magdalene* which portrayed her as old, unkempt and distraught in comparison to the usual picture of her as sweet and holy. Florentine figures were shocked at his bold, chaotic religious scenes that promoted a staggeringly reality-based style of art.

Although outrageous, Donatello's disturbing yet enchanting statues inspired new sculptors in Florence to create a new style themselves, following the precedent that Donatello had set. Sculptors such as Sluter were drawn into creating a new, ascetic and vigorous style similar to that of Donatello. The *Moses Fountain* created by Sluter was a perfect example of a sculpture that created a realistic illusion but with artistic flair to continue the passion and fantasy that had traditionally been created with art.

As we can see, these three artists were fundamental in turning Florentine art away from the international Gothic style that had dominated the art scene for so many years. Although they all started in the Gothic style, as they needed to experience art as

it was before they could change it, the dramatic new styles that they pioneered later in their careers were instrumental in changing the style of Florentine art. It is arguable, however, just how much of a 'new' style that they created. By referring back to the art of the classical period, it is impossible to say that these concepts were completely original, as there were examples of using models, attempting to create proportionally perfect figures and studying nature for inspiration. It is safe to say that Brunelleschi's discoveries of perspective and the new grotesque sculptures of Donatello were indeed distinctive and revolutionary and that Masaccio's amalgamation of the ideas that were floating around at his time but never compounded until his work created an essential style of Florentine art had set a new precedent for artists such as Michelangelo to follow. In this, we can say that although they took ideas from the past, the new slants that these three artists placed on tired old ideas created a distinctive style that was to become the definitive Renaissance mode.