The Fifteenth Century

In my last lecture we considered Italian 14th century painting from the innovations of Giotto at the beginning of the century to the triumph of the International Gothic style in the early fifteenth century in the work of such artists as Gentile da Fabriano. Today I want to turn to the fifteenth century and I will be covering in a more general way the ground already covered by Mrs. Garlick and Mr. Preston in considering original works of 15th century Netherlands in the Gallery.

In a survey course of this kind it is difficult to do any justice to the period with which we must now deal, known as the *rinascita* in Italian, *renaissance* in France and Renaissance in English. I can only hope that those of you who have not already done so either at school or in other courses here will make yourselves acquainted with the classical work on the subject Jacob Burckhardt’s *Civilisation of the Renaissance in Italy*.

Because it is difficult to cover the art of the fifteenth century even in the barest outline in one lecture I can only make the briefest comments here on the nature of the Renaissance. Literally the Renaissance was a failure; antiquity was dead and could never be reborn; the Renaissance was more a birth, to put it in the Irish way, than a rebirth, the both of the modern world. But it was the passionate admiration of scholars, princes and artists for the art and learning of the ancient world, which provided the men of the fifteenth century with an alternative set of values which they could oppose to the late Gothic values of their own time; in this way they were able to break through the values of the Middle Ages and lay the foundations of the modern world. The breakthrough was, of course, never complete; the values of the Middle Ages were never lost even at the height of the Renaissance; but it was complete enough to inaugurate a new age.

The Renaissance idea begins with the Italian poet Petrarch (1304-74); who belonged to the generation which succeeded Giotto’s. From the time of Charlemagne and Alcuin the ruins of Rome had left a haunting and challenging impression upon pilgrims, artists and scholars. But they left such an impression upon Petrarch, that the nostalgia for Rome’s past glory coloured not only his own writings but swelled in the course of a century through his influence into a powerful current of thought. In one of his letters to his friend Giovanni Colonna, Petrarch recalls how in their youth they shared the pleasures of wandering among the ruins of Rome together. ‘We used’ he write ‘after the fatigue of wandering about the immense city, often to make a halt at the Baths of Diocletian, and sometimes to ascend to the vaulted roof of that once most magnificent edifice; for nowhere is there sweeter air, a wider prospect, more silence and desirable solitude… And wandering among the crumbling walls, or sitting on the roof, the fragments of the ruins beneath our eyes, we used to have much talk on history’. These talks on history led to more than nostalgic memories of times past; for
it was Petrarch who developed a new idea of history. All Christian thinkers before him had thought of history as a continuous development from the creation of the world to the author’s lifetime. If divisions were made at all, such as BC ‘the era under the law’ ‘the old dispensation’ and AD the era under grace, the new dispensation; there were really theological rather than historical divisions. But Petrarch saw history sharply divided into two periods: the classical period before the birth of Christ; and the recent period, since the birth of Christ. And, where as his predecessors had seen the second period as a period of light following the darkness of the old dispensation, Petrarch sharply reversed the position seeing Pre-Christian, royal and republican Rome as an age of glory and light, and the second period in which “the name of Christ began to be celebrated in Rome an to be adored by the Roman Emperors” as the beginning of a dark ‘age’. And he believed that he himself had been born too early, that a third age a new glorious age as about to begin. In a poem which he wrote in 1338 after his first visit to Rome he says “this slumber of forgetfulness will not last forever. After the darkness has been dispelled our grandsons will be able to walk back into the pure radiance of the past.”

Petrarch was the first of the humanists; those scholars dedicated to the revival of classical learning and restoring Greek and Latin texts to their original purity. During the fifteenth century the humanists became a powerful social and educational force: the best of them went far towards combining the learning of the medieval scholar with the courtly manners of the chivalric knight; as the best letter writers, and rhetoricians, they gained employment as secretaries to princes as diplomats or as tutors to the children of kings. Although inevitably interconnected with the church, they did succeed in creating a new kind of secular learning distinguishable from the learning of the monasteries and the medieval universities. The humanists provided the educational background and the social atmosphere from which the artistic achievements of the Renaissance grew.

Although there is and doubtless always will be, considerable debate as to when the Renaissance began, the consensus of opinion is that it began around 1400. And the fifteenth century in Italy, or the quattrocento, is called the Early Renaissance, the first quarter of the sixteenth century being called the High Renaissance.

We can begin the study of 15th century art with the competition arranged by the Signoria (?) of Florence for a bronze door for the Baptistery of Florence held in 1401. It was won by Lorenzo Ghiberti, his principal opponent being Brunelleschi who subsequently devoted himself to architecture. Both Ghiberti and Brunelleschi’s trial pieces have survived; the scene set being the Sacrifice of Isaac.*** In Brunelleschi the action is violent; the terrified Isaac struggling against the knife, and the angel intervening at the last moment to restrain Abraham. The figure in the lower left is in the manner of the Hellenistic bronze Spinario (or the thorn puller). By contrast Ghiberti’s action* flows smoothly; Isaac is beautifully foreshortened. But the diagonal
rhythmical movement of Ghiberti’s piece, the hip sway of Abraham, reveals that Ghiberti owed much to the International Gothic style. After winning the competition Ghiberti made two pairs of doors: the first pair took him nineteen years, from 1403 to 1424; the second pair from 1425 to 1452. In the first pair the international gothic quality still predominates;** the senses are still set within quatrefoils; in the Baptism and temptation scenes for example, the Virgin sways back in a typically flowing Gothic way. The second pair of doors are much more classical in style,* they are divided into ten large panels illustrating Old Testament themes. In the Creation five even from Genesis are represented, with varying levels of relief of great refinement to suggest depth. In Jacob and Esau* the space recedes to an infinite distance. In the Story of Joseph* a large crowd is set against an architectural background cleverly and accurately foreshortened. Here Ghiberti made use of the work of his friend and rival. Brunelleschi had worked out the principles of centralized perspective mathematically for the first time in the early years of the fifteenth century, not but writing a treatise, but by painting a pair of panels now lost.

Ghiberti’s second pair of doors were greatly influence in style and technique by his great pupil Donatello, who had worked for Ghiberti as an apprentice on the first doors.

With Donatello we at last leave the late Gothic style for a style that may fairly be called early Renaissance. Take his famous St George executed about 1415. The feeling here is no longer Gothic. The stance is relaxed but eager; the weight resting easily upon the left forward leg. The relief below the statue of St George killing the dragon is even more adventurous and experimental in style and technique. The relief in fact is extremely shallow, but by means of infinite gradations Donatello has succeeded in suggesting a windswept landscape of great depth; for he has modulated his surfaces subtly so that they catch the light and shade. Indeed there is much akin to the painter’s technique in this almost impressionistic suggestion of depth.

In his statue of an unknown prophet called Zuccone* or pumpkin-head, we are confronted by Donatello’s new and highly expressive realism. Was this a product of direct observation from life, or of re-visualising and re-dramatising the role of an ancient Hebrew prophet? It is difficult to say; but here certainly Donatello has created a new kind of prophet, individualized and ugly like Roman busts* and full of inner vitality. With Donatello, one feels that 15th century Italy is now confronting ancient Roman art, not as children copying their great ancient masters, bit upon a basis of equality. And the quality of Donatello’s art is utterly different from Roman art: it is more dramatic, more sinewy, more tense. Although he is no longer Gothic, all this is his inheritance from the Gothic. Take his famous feast of Herod of 1425 made for the Baptismal font of the Baptistery of Siena Cathedral. The crowded compositions of Gothic reliefs has been abandoned for dramatic effect. Herod shrinks back in horror from the plate containing the bloody head. And so does everyone else. In the arcades beyond this,* we find what is said to be the earliest use of Brunelleschi’s controlled
perspective in sculpture—beyond the world goes on with its affairs unconcerned. (It was surely just the right kind of incident to attach to a baptismal font to remind all mothers what little girls can do after they take up ballet school.

Five years later, in 1430, Donatello produced his David with the head of Goliath; the first wholly free standing life size nude statue cast in bronze since antiquity. Janssen says that it is puzzling why Donatello represents David in this way. His nudity need not puzzle us, for the Biblical account tells how David armed himself with a coat of mail and a sword and then took them off again because he had not proved them; but that doesn’t explain why he retains a helmet and military boots: it may have something to do with the theory that if you have a nice hat and a nice pair of shoes you can always consider yourself well dressed.

The David, although it possesses a true classical feeling is based on no known classical model. By contrast, the famous equestrian statue of Gattamalata, the commander of the Venetian armies, completed about 1450 owes much to the famous antique statue of Marcus Aurelius, the only equestrian statue surviving from Roman view which remained on public view in Rome all through the Middle Ages and is still to be seen on the Campidoglio today. Throughout the Middle Ages it was believed to be a statue of Constantine. The head of the Gattamalata* is an individual portrait which combines a powerfully expressive Roman air of grandeur.

The Gattamalata was completed at Padua where Donatello also executed some remarkable reliefs for the High Altar of the Church of San Antonio. Here is one, the Miracle of the Ass, 1441, which shows Donatello further exploiting centralized perspective, fine detailed shallow carving and dramatic effect.

The expressive dramatic character triumphs in his later works such as the unforgettable aged Mary Magdalene in wood, in the Baptistery at Florence; a statue which derives far more, I believe, from Donatello’s personal observations, Old age, piety and poverty, which he must have seen so often in the streets of Florence, than from any say Hellenistic source. For the humanists, we must remember, the return to the classics also meant a return to nature; because for the essential goal of classical art was mimesis, that is, the imitation of Nature.

Donatello’s output was prodigious, he exercised the most profound effect upon the subsequent development of Florentine sculpture and Florentine painting; ad through it the whole art of the Renaissance. His influence can hardly be overestimated.

Donatello’s counterpart in architecture was Brunelleschi who had tuned to architecture after failing to win the competition for the bronze doors of the Baptistery. He went to Rome where he studied the ruins, taking measurements and making measured drawing accurate renderings of ancient buildings may have helped him to
work out the laws of centralized perspective. Back in Florence, in 1417, he as given
the job of building the dome of the Cathedral. This was a major engineering problem
and in its solution Brunelleschi combined both Gothic and Roman systems of vault
construction. A good detailed and straightforward account of Brunelleschi’s problem
and solution is to be found in Peter Murray’s *The Architecture of the Italian
Renaissance*.

The first truly Renaissance building however built to Brunelleschi’s own plan ad after
his own ideals was the foundling Hospital* which he built for his own guild, the Guild
of Silk Merchants and Goldsmiths, the famous hospital degli Innocenti, built between
1419 and 1424, with its graceful arcaded loggia, supporting domed bays square in
plan. The spandrels were decorated later by terra-cotta roundels by Lucca Della
Robbia.

More important was Brunelleschi’s Church of San Lorenzo* begun in 1421. Its
unvaulted nave and simplicity links it with the Cistercian Gothic; but there is a new
Renaissance insistence upon symmetry and regularity. Four squares form the choir,
crossing and transepts, four more the nave. Squares a quarter of the size of the large
square make up the aisle bays and chapels. Brunelleschi, in other words, has
simplified spatial organization, made a unity out of independent spatial blocks. There
was an element of what we should call today archaism in Brunelleschi’s thought, at
San Lorenzo he sought to create quite deliberately the austere mathematical serenity
of the early Christian basilica’s of Rome, such as St Paul’s outside the Walls* built in
the 4th century. Brunelleschi adopted similar principles in designing the church of
Santo Spirito,* Florence, which possesses a more sculptural feeling and a grander,
more truly Roman effect.

One of Brunelleschi’s most appealing buildings is the Pazzi Chapel begun in 1430.*
Note that this is a centrally planned chapel;* and the centrally planed church was soon
to become of the greatest importance for Renaissance architectural theory and practice
under the influence of Brunelleschi’s great successor, Alberti. The porch of the Pazzi
chapel may well have been inspired by the narthexes of early Christian churches: and
we must note Brunelleschi’s use here of what is to become a most important
Renaissance architectural motif: a colonnade broken in the centre by a round headed
arch. Within the chapel* the firm geometry of the design was emphasized by
contrasting the pietra serena stone with the white washed walls, and embellishing bays
with roundels by Lucca della Robbia.

Donatello’s counterpart in painting was Masaccio, born in 1401. During his short life
of 27 years he developed an austere and heroic style in sharp contrast to the
international Gothic style then current; and fully comparable to Donatello’s early
achievements in sculpture. His grasp of space, mass, weight and volume and his
feeling for the dramatic justifies the well-known description that he was Giotto born again. His two major works are the polyptych painted for the Carmelite Church at Pisa in 1426-7; and the frescoes for the Brancacci Chapel of the Carmelite Church in Florence, painted a little later between 1426 and his departure for Rome in 1428.

Compare his Madonna and Child* from the Pisa Polyptych with this Madonna by Gentile* in the International Gothic style painted two or three years earlier. In Masaccio the forms are thought of as 3-dimensional, occupying a defined position in space, and all lit from one source of light. We are here once again with that monumental style of painting which had not flourished since the death of Giotto.

The earliest datable painting by Massacio is his Holy Trinity with the Virgin and St John in Sta Maria novella, Florence, with two donors.* The architectural setting reveal Masaccio’s command of Brunelleschi’s new scientific one-point perspective. All the foreshortened lines converge to a point just below the foot of the cross which happens to be placed at a normal eye-level about five feet from the floor of the chapel containing the fresco. The only figure not foreshortened is that of God the Father who looms and hovers about the crucified Christ like a Byzantine image of God the Father. Whether this was deliberate or the result of an incomplete solution to the perspective problem must remain a matter of speculation.

The most famous of the Brancacci chapel frescoes is the Tribute Money. In the centre Christ instructs Peter to go and catch the fish; at the left Peter catches the fish and takes the coin from its mouth and at the right gives it to the tax collector. It thus preserves the old method of continuous narration of Roman and Assyrian relief, distinct from Giotto’s preference for one picture one event. On the other hand, the source of light in the fresco corresponds with the actual source of light which comes from the right into the chapel; the space created is deeper than Giotto’s and Masaccio also uses not only linear perspective, but also atmospheric or colour perspective by subtly changing the tones of the landscape as it recedes. Christ is the centre of the group both spatially and psychologically. Everyone turns to him. We have therefore a return to coherence and economy of composition which again reminds us of Giotto. We feel indeed that we are here in the presence of a beauty to which nothing could be added and nothing taken away without in some way destroying the effect of whole.

And it was in these very terms that Alberti, a few years later was to define that ideal beauty which the artists of the High Renaissance sought so assiduously.

Having considered then the three great original spirits of the early Renaissance I can only here mention by name some of the many important artists of the Quattrocento who followed them.
Firstly, Masolino, who assisted Massaccio with the Brancacci chapel frescoes and leaned much from him, but there is an elegance of stance and dress which link Masolino to the International Gothic style.

Secondly, Filippo Lippi, in whose work something of the massive three-dimensionality of Massaccio is preserved; but is united with an interest in movement—note the lively child—that is derived from the sculpture of Donatello and Ghiberti. Fra Filippo was a pupil of Masaccio in the Carmelite monastery at Florence.

Thirdly, Fra Angelico, who became a Dominican at an early age and as a member of a teaching order intended that his work should be didactic. The cells and corridors of San Marco, Florence is covered with his work. Such a painting as the Annunciation preserves the directness and simplicity of statement of Masaccio and his deep space: but the approach is sweeter, more emotional, more pathetic; and indicates the continued vitality of the International Gothic mode.

Fourthly Domenico Veneziano who settled in Florence in 1439. His Madonna and Child with Saints is an early example of a type of composition featuring the Madonna with a group of appropriate saints about her, which became particularly popular during the Renaissance and is know as a Sacra Conversazione (or sacred conversation). Domenic has built upon Massaccio’s innovations, adding to them a new beauty and grace of colour, and a new interest in direct sunlight.

Fifthly Piero della Francesca who began life as Domenico Veneziano’s assistant. Piero’s most important achievement was the great fresco cycle in the choir of S, Francesco at Arezzo representing the legend of the True Cross; according to which the Empress Helena, mother of Constantine, the first Christian Emperor of Rome, discovered the true cross and the crosses of the two thieves on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land.

Piero inherited from Masaccio a monumental cubic simplicity of composition; and from his own master Veneziano, a beautifully limpid, airy blonde colour scheme which endows his paintings with such clarity.

Sixthly we have Andrea del Castagno. His work forms a strong contrast to that of Piero. In some ways he is the most important Florentine painter since Masaccio: since he directed Florentine painting towards a different goal. Here is his last supper. Where it differs from Masaccio is in its strong linear emphasis where Masaccio and Piero were painterly. Space and light is organized as an extension of the real space and light of the observer; the medieval iconographic type which placed Judas on the wrong side of the table, and Christ inclined towards the sorrowing St John is used. But the general
approach is harsh, linear and realistic and this firm and wiry drawn line continues to be a feature of Florentine painting to the end of the fifteenth century.

And finally Paolo Uccello who was trained first in his youth in the international Gothic Style and modified his style in his middle years to incorporate the new interest in centralized perspective, so that in his work such as the Battle of San Romano we are confronted by a fantastic combination of the rich surface patterning of the International Gothic with sharp and dramatic foreshortening of horses, lances and fallen men.

Theses painters represent the first generation of the quattrocento; in my next lecture I shall endeavor to survey the later years of the fifteenth century and the first quarter of the sixteenth century.
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