

Fifteenth-Century Flemish Painting

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WHAT'S COVERED

Fifteenth-century Flemish painting and Italian Renaissance painting both have unique characteristics and symbology. In this lesson, you will learn about:

1. Period and Location: Fifteenth-Century Flemish Painting

2. Flemish vs. Italian Renaissance Painting

2a. Mérode and Ghent Altarpieces

2b. Arnolfini Portrait

2c. A Goldsmith in His Shop

2d. The Garden of Earthly Delights

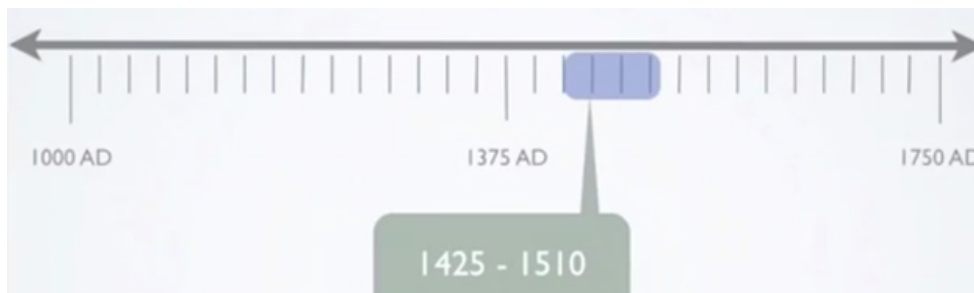


BIG IDEA

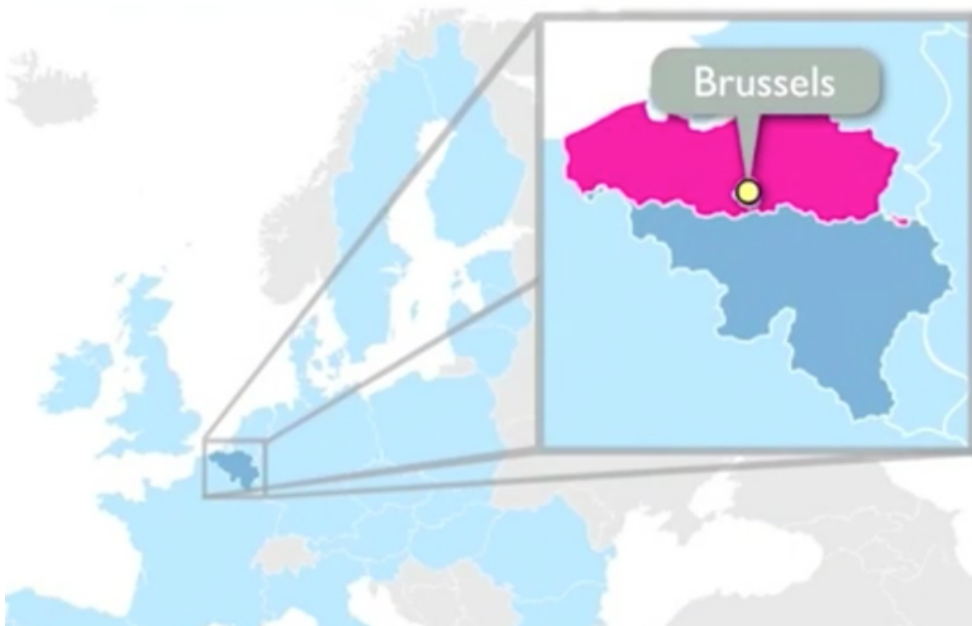
Northern Renaissance painters began using oil paints before their Italian contemporaries and created a unique style that blended the secular and religious with an emphasis on detail and texture.

1. Period and Location: Fifteenth-Century Flemish Painting

The artwork covered in this lesson ranges from 1425 to 1510 in **Flanders**, as highlighted in the timeline below.



Here is a map of the region. Use the city of Brussels for a reference point.



TERM TO KNOW

Flanders

A region in Belgium characterized by a thriving artistic, educational culture and society, especially noted for textiles.

2. Flemish vs. Italian Renaissance Painting

Flemish and Italian Renaissance painting have both stylistic and material differences. Stylistically, Flemish painting was much more secular. While Italian painting often used fresco or tempera as mediums, these types of paintings would not work well in the north due to the colder climate.

Just as full-length sculptures and fresco murals were the major sources of commissions for the artists of the Italian Renaissance, ornately carved and painted altarpieces were a main source of commissions for the artists of the Northern Renaissance.

The favored medium in the north was oil paint on a wood panel. The wood was treated with a layer of gesso, a chalky, white liquid that dried and gave the oil paint a surface to adhere to.

With oil paint, the artist could achieve deep, luminous color and glazing—painting translucent layers of color on top of each other, which was just not possible with other media.

Master painters passed down their techniques and tricks of **oil painting** from generation to generation as young painters received training through the guild system. Before becoming a master, an artist would have to serve as an apprentice and learn different tasks such as the grinding of pigments, the sanding and preparation of wood panels, and assisting the master artist in the painting of less important figures, eventually becoming a master himself. This type of artistic training was almost completely closed to women.



DID YOU KNOW

When it was too cold, fresco or tempura paintings would not dry properly. This is just one reason why oil painting took hold in the north before it took hold in Italy. Eventually, oil painting became the preferred method of painting everywhere.

Humanism was a theme in Italian paintings from this period. The application of rational, scientific principles, such as one point, or linear, perspective was also common in Italian paintings. On the other hand, in Flanders, the Flemish emphasis was on textures, textiles, and detail. For the Flemish, the overall look of the painting was more important than the scientific mathematical qualities of it.



DID YOU KNOW

Another reason oil painting became the preferred method was because more detail could be achieved using oil, due to the layering process. A glaze is laid down, and gradually the artist builds up color, adding depth to that color.



TERMS TO KNOW

Flemish

Belgian Dutch, referring to Flanders.

Oil Painting

The process of applying pigments suspended in linseed oil to a surface characterized by a quality that gives it a luminous appearance.

2a. Mérode and Ghent Altarpieces

Altarpieces were among the most interactive works of art from this time period. They could be opened and closed and showed different iconographic programs depending on the way that they were displayed. It is also important to remember that the altarpiece was not viewed in isolation, the way that we view it when we are looking at an image in a book; it was made to fit into an entire artistic program of sculpture and architecture. For this reason, we can think of altarpieces as the multimedia or installation works of their day.

Robert Campin was one of the earliest artists to use oil painting, and by the 15th century, this technique was mastered by a number of Flemish painters. Oil paint is applied as a series of glazes to build up depth and color in a way that isn't possible with tempera paint. Campin used it to create his altarpiece, Annunciation Triptych, also known as the *Mérode Altarpiece*.

As in Florence, in northern Europe the middle class was growing in influence and was a source of artistic commissions. This was an altarpiece that would have been used privately, in a home. It was done for a devout middle-class couple, shown kneeling on the left.

This format is called a triptych and is a very common format for an altarpiece. The two side wings can be folded in and closed.



Robert Campin
Mérode Altarpiece
1425–1428
Oil on wood

This depiction of the Annunciation by Campin occupies the space at the center of the panel shown above.



As you explore the image above, notice how detailed and realistic the clothing looks. Also take note of how the scene takes place in what would have been recognized at the time as a Flemish home. The perspective is somewhat off, particularly with the table. However, that would not have been the primary concern of the artist. Rather, the way the painting looked was more important than the proper application of scientific perspective, which wasn't really known in this region at the time.

The objects placed within the room—the extinguished candle, the lilies, the copper pot in the back, and more—were carefully selected and are symbolic in some way of the purity of the Virgin Mary. The panel on the left depicts the donor and his wife looking in on the event while Mary's husband, Joseph, works in his shop on the right panel making a mousetrap, symbolic of Christ's victory over Satan. Christ is the bait for the devil.

➤ **EXAMPLE** In this next altarpiece by the artist Jan van Eyck, the three panels are divided horizontally, separating into two main horizontal registers.



Jan van Eyck
Ghent Altarpiece
 1432
 Oil on wood



DID YOU KNOW

The above panel is about 15 feet long by about 11 feet high, and it was painted in 1432. It is an oil painting on wood, which was common for this region, as wood was plentiful.

On the top, God is enthroned and flanked by Mary to his right and Saint John the Baptist to his left. On either side of the trio are choirs of angels playing the organ. Further still on the outer edges are the figures of Adam and Eve.

In the lower register, the community of saints congregates around the altar of the lamb, which is a symbol for Christ, and fountain of life, which is the octagonal object in the foreground of the middle panel of the bottom register. Van Eyck took extra care to render the entire composition in incredible detail and color. This altarpiece still stands as one of the greatest examples of Northern Renaissance painting.



TERM TO KNOW

Altarpiece

A religious subject painted or carved on a screen above or behind the altar or table in a Christian church and often made of two or more panels.

2b. *Arnolfini Portrait*

Giovanni Arnolfini was a financier associated with the wealthy and influential Medici family of Italy. The portrait of Arnolfini and his bride, called the *Arnolfini Portrait*, by the artist Jan van Eyck, is a wonderful example that embodies the northern Flemish style that emphasized incredibly detailed and realistically textured works of art. Although this portrait appears to be a simple wedding portrait, the painting is abundant with religious symbolism.



Jan van Eyck
Arnolfini Portrait
1432
Oil on wood

The context is possibly that of the actual ceremony, but this is one of many theories. There are actually two other people in the room, van Eyck himself and perhaps a religious official, whose reflections can be seen in the tiny mirror in the back of the room. Around the convex mirror, which represents the all-seeing eye of God, there are tiny medallions depicting the passion of the Christ, a reminder of God's salvation.

Arnolfini's bride is located near the marriage bed, where the curtains have been pulled back. And the finial, which is the ornament on top of the bedpost, is of Saint Margaret, the patron saint of childbirth. The bride's gesture and clothing suggest pregnancy, but she isn't pregnant. This style of clothing was consistent with the style at the time. The clog suggests that the place that they are standing is sacred ground. The small dog is symbolic of trust or fidelity to one another, as well as their wedding vows.



THINK ABOUT IT

Their position in the room is also interesting. He is closer to the window, as his life takes place in the outside world, while her position further in is suggestive of the traditional domestic role of a woman at this time. Overall, this is a unique combination of the secular imagery that was common in the Northern Renaissance with the religious symbolism ever present in the Renaissance artwork of contemporary Italy.

2c. *A Goldsmith in His Shop*

Flemish artists carefully selected everyday items that could function symbolically in a composition.

⇒ **EXAMPLE** This is evident in the painting below. *A Goldsmith in His Shop* is an example of the work of later Flemish panel painter Petrus Christus.



Petrus Christus

A Goldsmith in His Shop

1449

Oil on wood

Take a look at the bride's girdle on the table, a symbol of chastity. The goldsmith is possibly St. Eligius, who was a goldsmith before committing himself to his faith, sitting in his workshop wearing the gold ring of a wedded couple. It is believed that the local goldsmiths' guild commissioned this work, and Christus undoubtedly chose the subject matter as a way of combining the religious with the secular.

2d. *The Garden of Earthly Delights*

The artist Hieronymus Bosch, who hails from the Netherlands, is one of most debated artists of this period. Much of his work is downright confusing.

⇒ EXAMPLE Take, for example, *The Garden of Earthly Delights* from 1506 to 1510.

We do not know the work's official title, but that is what it is commonly referred to.

The imagery is highly imaginative and complex and is totally different than that of any other artist at this time. Scholars have attempted to explain the imagery as a sort of Last Judgment, or reflection on the horrors that the sinful will suffer after they are condemned. There are some problems with this argument, however. One is that Bosch did paint a Last Judgment that is quite a bit different from *The Garden of Earthly Delights*.

Usually, Last Judgment scenes include images of the fall from grace, when Eve eats the apple and consequently is banished from Eden along with Adam, and the actual Last Judgment, when God divides humankind into the virtuous and the damned. These scenes are both conspicuously lacking from *The Garden of Earthly Delights*.

The left panel depicts the moment when God created Eve for Adam. God is shown presenting her to Adam, who gazes at her in wonder.

A number of exotic animals populate the scene. In the background there are a giraffe and an elephant, but also a number of imaginary animals such as a two-legged dog, a unicorn, a three-headed bird, and a half-duck, half-fish. The animals also seem to have a somewhat sinister aspect to them, for there is a cat shown having caught a mouse and two birds fighting over prey in the foreground.

There is a suggestion that perhaps this scene depicts Paradise as being the entire world, and Bosch has imagined what the animals of unknown parts of the world would look like. This was at the time of the first exploration of the New World, and so there were many rumors and some factual data about what the plants and animals of the most remote parts of the world looked like.

The central panel depicts a scene of people frolicking in nature with oversized fruits and birds. There are also a number of strange pink structures in the background, egg and orb shapes, and glass tubing and vessels that seem to suggest the tools of alchemy, which Bosch's in-laws practiced.

These people seem to be enjoying themselves without any self-consciousness that would go along with sinning. There also is a strange lack of individuality: Everyone is young, the women are slim with long hair, and the men are pale and beardless. There are a few people of color here and there who are absolutely jet-black.

The panel depicting hell seems to be a hell of human creation, for there are a few demons that are composites of different types of animals, but otherwise no sense of being in nature, as in the other two panels. Above the entire scene is a nightmarish cityscape that is burning, buildings silhouetted against flames: a scene that probably played out repeatedly throughout Europe at this time.

When the triptych is closed, the outer panels depict the third day of creation. The cosmos is depicted as a glass globe and inside is the world, with only plants, as animals and people had not yet been created. Everything is in black and white, as the sun and the moon had not yet been created, so colors could not be seen.

It was thought for a while that this triptych was made for a heretical sect; however, recently discovered documents suggest that it was made for a Flemish nobleman.



Hieronymus Bosch

The Garden of Earthly Delights

1505–1510

Oil on wood



SUMMARY

Flemish paintings and Italian Renaissance paintings both have unique characteristics and symbology, especially those from the 15th century. In this lesson, you learned about the **period and location of fifteenth-century Flemish painting**.

In doing so, you began to explore **Flemish vs. Italian Renaissance painting**, which had both stylistic and material differences. Stylistically, Flemish painting was much more secular, and Italian painting used fresco or tempera as mediums. The application of rational scientific principles was common in Italian paintings, while the Flemish emphasis was on textures, textiles, and detail. Finally, you compared works of art from this period, including:

- *Mérode and Ghent Altarpieces*
- *Arnolfini Portrait*
- *A Goldsmith in His Shop*
- *The Garden of Earthly Delights*



TERMS TO KNOW

Altarpiece

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Flanders

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