Late Gothic/Early Renaissance in Italy

by Sophia

☰ **WHAT'S COVERED**

The Late Gothic and Early Renaissance art in Italy were defined by the changes happening during this period. Shifts to classical ideals and elements were apparent as the Renaissance developed. This lesson covers:

1. **Period and Location: Late Gothic/Early Renaissance**

2. **The Developing Renaissance**

3. **Late Gothic Art**

4. **Cimabue and Giotto**

5. **Siena and Florence Cathedrals**

☆ **BIG IDEA**

The Renaissance developed gradually over time, time that was interspersed with artists such as Giotto, marking distinct instances where the shift to classical ideals was notable.

1. Period and Location: Late Gothic/Early Renaissance

The artwork and architecture covered in this lesson originates between 1200 and 1450 in Italy, highlighted on the timeline below. Remember, Italy was the birthplace of the European Renaissance, and this lesson focuses attention primarily on the city of Florence.

1000 AD   **13?5 AD**   **1750 AD**

1200-1450 AD
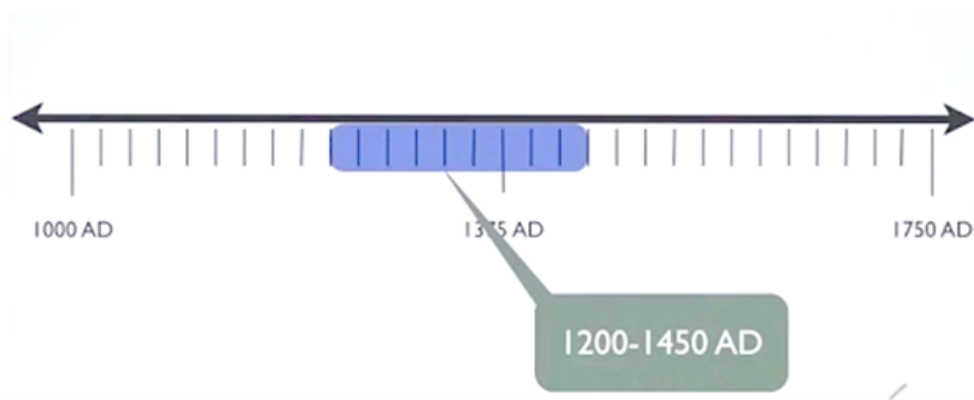
2. The Developing Renaissance

As we begin to explore this period, it is important to understand that the **Renaissance** did not just start suddenly; it developed gradually over time, and in different periods of time around Europe, beginning with Italy around the end of the 13th century.

The development of the visual style during this time can be attributed to a number of things, including:

- Rise of city-states in Italy
- Increase of trade
- Refinement of the concept of **humanism** in literature, attributed to the increase and eventual return to **naturalism** seen in the art of the Renaissance

The fact that the Renaissance developed in Italy is significant for both cultural and economic reasons. Not only was Rome a major center of classical culture, but Italy and specifically Florence were the places where the middle class began to develop.

As with medieval France, Italy had originally been ruled by aristocrats, and there was a similar breakdown in society: Church, aristocrats, peasants. The aristocrats ruled over small regional kingdoms, with none of them ever acquiring a great deal of power, and so Italy was broken up into small city-states.

In Florence, manufacturing was very important—namely, the manufacture of wool and other textiles. Various guilds (basically the equivalent of present-day trade unions) developed for different types of manufacturing. Then a class of merchants began to develop, whose sole job was to sell the cloth and to engage in other financial matters such as banking, money lending, etc.

Money lending and charging interest had originally been condemned by the Church as immoral, since they involved taking advantage of people, but in Italy, the rules began to loosen a bit. People of the merchant class could make up for their sins by becoming patrons of the arts and paying for a sculpture, fresco, altarpiece, or even an entire chapel. In fact, sponsoring a work of art was much cheaper than paying for brocades, woodwork, or other materials, and eventually it became more prestigious.

Renaissance art, especially in Florence, should therefore never be considered outside of the issue of patronage, or who sponsored the work of art. Even if there had been really good ideas, there still would not have been a Renaissance if no one had paid for the art.

📄 **TERMS TO KNOW**

Renaissance

A cultural movement marking a time of accelerated activity and learning expressed by art and literature in Europe during the 14th to 17th centuries.

Humanism

Study or system of ethical practice that promotes human interests, values, scientific investigations, and human pleasures in the natural world and often rejects the belief in God.

Naturalism

An artistic approach that involves reproducing objects as they appear to the eye. This term is often used in art history as a substitute for realistic, to avoid any confusion with realism as an artistic movement.

3. Late Gothic Art

Perspective in the two-dimensional visual arts had not been perfected by this time.

⇗ EXAMPLE Below is an example of a fresco, titled *Peaceful City From Effects of Good Government in the City,* by the Italian artist Ambrosia Lorenzetti.

Ambrosia Lorenzetti

*Peaceful City From Effects of Good Government in the City*

1338–1339

Fresco

This fresco shows attempts at creating a sense of depth, but notice that there is not a single vanishing point. Each one of the buildings appears to have its own vanishing point.

Italian Gothic art from this time also shows the continued influence of the Byzantine style, or **maniera greca**, which was used by Italian artists such as Duccio from Siena, and Bonaventura Berlinghieri.

⤷ EXAMPLE Below is an altarpiece of Saint Francis of Assisi by Berlinghieri.
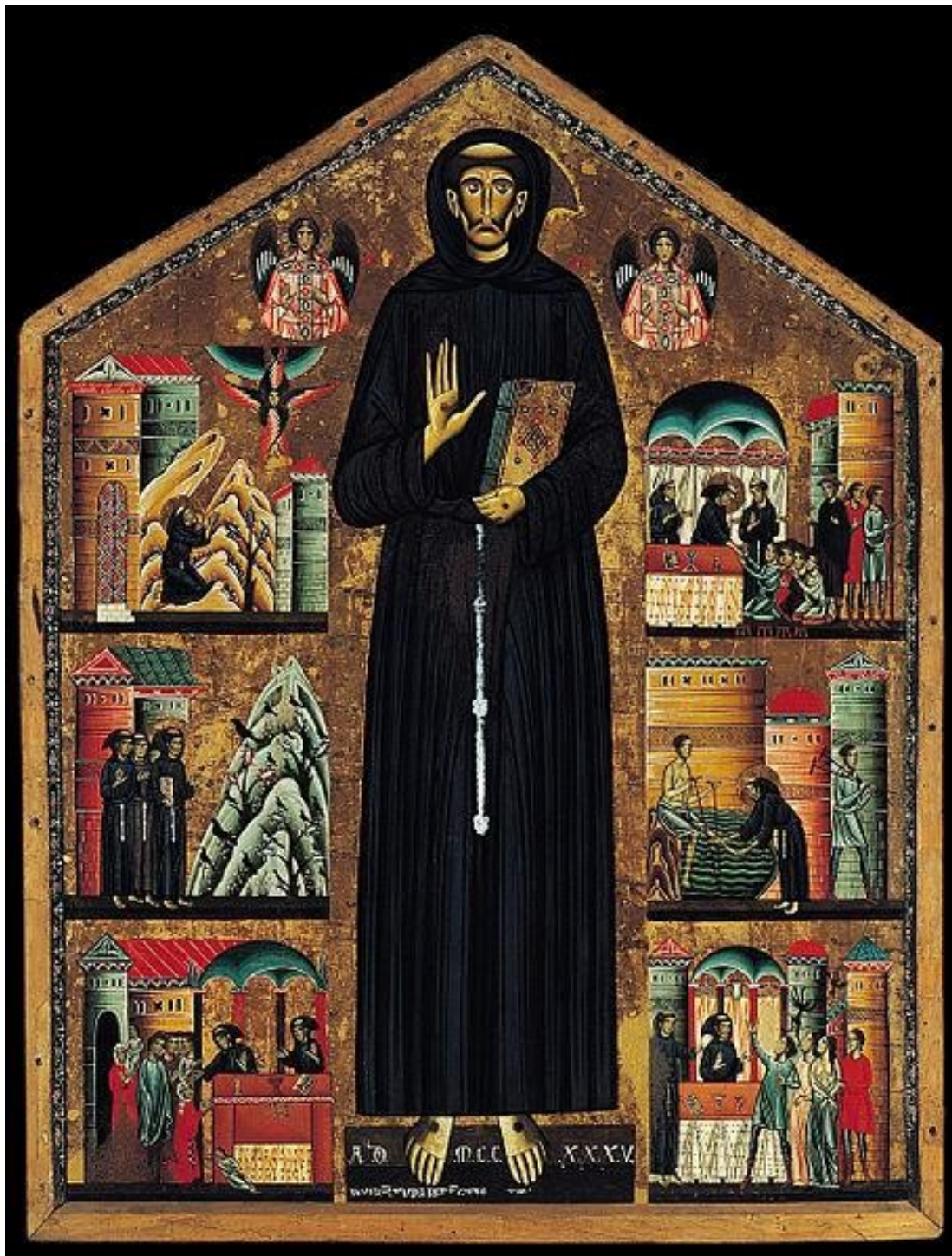
Bonaventura Berlinghieri

Saint Francis Altarpiece

1235

Tempera on wood

Notice how the images in this above example are very flat. The folds of cloth appear as hard lines, and rather than gradients of shadow, there is a sharp contrast of black on color. This is due to the fact that the medium of this image is tempera, which uses egg as a binder.

Before the Renaissance, there had been a strong Byzantine influence in Florence. During one of the Crusades, the city of Constantinople was sacked, and all of the local artists were forced to leave, so many of them came to Florence. Florentine artists started to work in a style that was heavily influenced by Byzantine art, but at the same time added their own innovations.

⊘ DID YOU KNOW

Tempera paint was a limited medium in terms of creating shadow that suggested depth, as oil paint had not yet arrived as a medium.

▤ TERMS TO KNOW

Perspective

A technique that depicts three-dimensional volume and space relationships on a flat surface.

Maniera Greca

In Italian painting, the tendency to paint in the "Greek" style reminiscent of Byzantine icons, with stiff, flattened forms, hard lines that indicate folds in cloth, and the use of gold leaf.

4. Cimabue and Giotto

The first artist to begin departing from the Byzantine style of Italian Gothic painting was Florentine artist Cimabue, also known as Cenni di Pepo or Cenni di Pepi.

⤷ EXAMPLE Here is an example of Cimabue's work:

Cimabue

Madonna Enthroned With Angels

1280–1290

The Byzantine influence is still here, particularly with the arrangement of forms and the golden background. However, instead of the flatness associated with the Byzantine style, Cimabue uses the architecture to create a sense of depth in the image, as well as space for the individual characters to recede into.

↪ EXAMPLE Compare the above example to another image of the Madonna and Child enthroned, by the artist known as Giotto:

Giotto

Madonna Enthroned

1310

Giotto is one of the first artists associated with the Italian Renaissance, since he turned to nature and painted by observing nature, rather than working in a particular style of painting. His ability to do this successfully is largely

attributed to his particular style, rather than the influence of a particular master. According to Vasari, Giotto worked under Cimabue before establishing himself as an artist, although many art historians consider that story to be a legend. Vasari also has many accounts of Giotto's skill as an artist that also seem closer to legend than historical fact.

Here, the Virgin Mary is enthroned again, within Gothic-style architecture like in Cimabue's painting. However, the physical depiction is very different. There is a sense of a physical body under the clothing, and it's better articulated in this painting than it is in Cimabue's. There is also a truer feeling of space around and behind Mary's throne, along with the use of **modeling**.

Giotto was an accomplished artist and was commissioned to create a number of notable works of art, including the design of the **campanile** at the Florence Cathedral.

Here is a view of the frescos from the Arena Chapel:

Giotto

Arena Chapel frescos

1305

Fresco

Above is a great example of buon fresco, or paint applied to wet plaster, which worked quite well in the mild Mediterranean climate of Italy. It is something you wouldn't see in the cooler climates of northern Europe.

Modeling

In painting, the depiction of forms, particularly the human form, as having a rounded, three-dimensional shape, indicated by the use of shadows.

Campanile

Usually freestanding, a bell tower.

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5. Siena and Florence Cathedrals

The Italian examples of Gothic architecture are quite unique compared to French Gothic architecture.

⤳ EXAMPLE This example of Gothic architecture from the 13th century, the Siena Cathedral, offers the opportunity to compare the Italian Gothic style with the French.

Siena Cathedral

**Siena, Italy**

1215–1263

In essence, it is a traditional cruciform-style church. The western façade shown here is quite large and magnificent, with a central rose window and a three-portal entrance. The design, however, is very ornate.

Notice the absence of the bell towers, or campaniles, attached to the façade. They have been pushed back toward the middle of the church. This creates a less imposing presence and creates a more intimate feeling with the surrounding city.

⤳ EXAMPLE Now compare it with the commanding presence of the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, France.
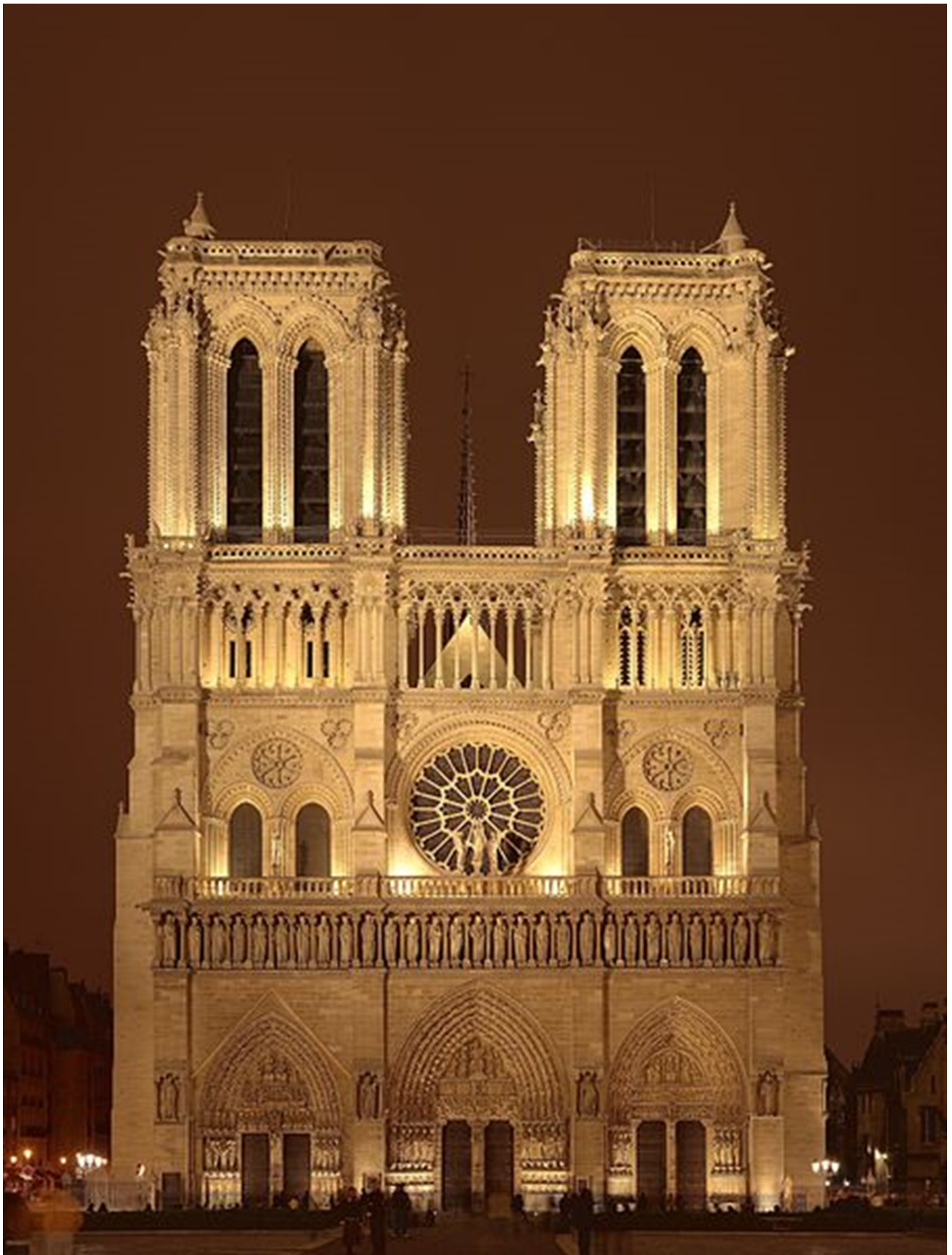
Notre Dame Cathedral

Paris, France

1163–1345

The addition of the two bell towers up front makes for a dramatic change that dominates the surrounding landscape rather than integrating with it.

⤳ EXAMPLE   The final piece of architecture we'll look at is the famous Florence Cathedral.

Florence Cathedral

Florence, Italy

1436

This cathedral combines elements of Gothic and Renaissance architecture. For example, the use of the pointed arch and ribbed vaulting are Gothic, but the overall design is more earthbound than vertical—actually, more horizontal than vertical.

Exterior of Florence Cathedral

The exterior is decorated in white, green, and pink marble in geometric designs rather than the elaborate sculptural programs of French Gothic cathedrals.

Interior of Florence Cathedral

The interior is also much more reserved and efficient in terms of its design. Again, notice the use of the ribbed vaulting and pointed arches.

Dome of Florence Cathedral

The dome clearly dominates the church, as it is tremendous in size. It was designed by the artist Brunelleschi, and it's considered one of the major achievements of the Renaissance. The artist Giotto was responsible for the design of the campanile, shown toward the left side of the image. It has geometric patterns that reflect the exterior decoration of the church, but it is itself unattached to the church, and functions very much as its own structure.

SUMMARY

As the Renaissance began to develop over time, Late Gothic and Early Renaissance art was defined by these changes. In this lesson, you learned about the **period and location of Late Gothic and Early Renaissance** art. In doing so, you explored **the developing Renaissance**. Remember, the Renaissance did not start on a specific date, but instead developed over time.

Late Gothic art began to make attempts to perfect perspective in the two-dimensional visual arts. Italian Gothic art from this time also shows the continued influence of the Byzantine style, or maniera greca.

Cimabue and Giotto were two artists that made ground in Late Gothic and Renaissance art. The first artist to begin departing from the Byzantine style of Italian Gothic painting was the artist Cimabue, while Giotto is often referred to as the "Renaissance painter." Finally, you explored the **Siena and Florence Cathedrals**, both examples of the architecture of the time.

TERMS TO KNOW

Campanile
Usually freestanding, a bell tower.

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