

Humanism in the Renaissance

Class: Social Studies

Theme(s):

Quest for Knowledge

Arts & Architecture

BACKGROUND

During the Middle Ages (a period of European history from the third through 13th centuries), art and learning were centered on the church and religion. But at the start of the 14th century, people became less interested in thinking about God, heaven and the saints, and more interested in thinking about themselves, their surroundings and their everyday lives. Part of this change was influenced by the study of ancient Greek and Roman writings on scientific matters, government, philosophy, and art. When scholars during the Renaissance began to study these writings, their interests turned away from traditional areas of study such as religion, medicine and the law. The people of the Renaissance became interested in other areas of science, the natural world, biology and astronomy. People now studied mathematics, engineering, and architecture. Artists, writers, musicians and composers began creating work outside of the church. Artists signed their work and authors wrote autobiographies and memoirs -- stories about themselves.

The values and ideals popular during the European Renaissance can be described by the term *secular humanism*: secular, meaning not religious and humanism, meaning placing the study and progress of human nature at the center of interests.

The rise of Humanism can be seen in paintings created by Renaissance artists. During the Middle Ages, saints in paintings wore halos (a ring or circle of light) around their heads. Artists also used *hieratic scale* in paintings during the Middle Ages, making saints or members of the family of God larger in scale than ordinary or less important figures. As Humanism became more popular during the Renaissance, ordinary people grew to be the same size as saints in paintings and saints began to look more like ordinary people. For example, halos became fainter and eventually disappeared during the Renaissance.

Saints occupied the same landscape as ordinary people in Renaissance paintings and the landscape was earth instead of heaven. In the Middle Ages it was common for artists to represent figures of heaven against a gold background, a symbol for the beauty and value of the atmosphere of heaven. As Renaissance artists experimented with new Humanist ideas, the natural landscape began to appear as a background in paintings. Saints left their golden atmosphere to occupy the same gardens, forests and buildings that everyday people lived in.

During the Renaissance, the use mathematical perspective to represent space in paintings was invented.



The central figures of the Madonna and child in this painting from the late Middle Ages are much larger than the four saints who stand below the Madonna or the angels gathered around the upper edges of the painting. The artists made the Madonna and child larger to help viewers understand that they are the most important figures in the painting.

Jacopa di Cione
Madonna and Child in Glory
1360/65
Tempera and gold on panel



ZOOM IN

HUMANISM IN THE RENAISSANCE: BACKGROUND (continued)

Earlier attempts at representing space often resulted in furniture or buildings that look just a little "off." Using mathematical formulas, instead of just the human eye, gave artists new tools to represent three-dimensional space in a convincing way. Renaissance paintings began to give the impression that the frame around the painting was a window frame, and looking at the painting was like looking through a window.

Artists began to use oil paints for the first time during the Renaissance. In the Middle Ages, egg tempera was used most widely. Mixing egg yolks with pigments made egg tempera and artists made their own paints. Egg tempera dried quickly and created a flat, rough surface. Oil paint was invented in the early 15th century and created great excitement among Renaissance artists. Oil paint dried slowly, and was translucent, meaning light could shine through the paint. The characteristics of oil paint allowed artists to build layers of color and create paintings with the appearance of greater depth.



The holy family of Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus are joined here by shepherds and an angel in the center playing a lute. The landscape around them is earthly rather than heavenly.

Giovanni Agostino da Lodi
Adoration of the Shepherds
1510
Oil on panel



ZOOM IN

HUMANISM IN THE RENAISSANCE (continued)

CLASSROOM TIME

One 40 minute period

OBJECTIVES

The students will:

- Understand that evidence of Humanism in the European Renaissance can be found in paintings from the Renaissance.
- Understand the differences between the cultures of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance that are revealed in works of art.
- Learn to distinguish the stylistic differences between Renaissance paintings and works of art from the European Middle Ages.
- Apply criteria of Humanistic evidence to paintings to determine their place in Renaissance history.



Franconian School
Miraculous Mass of St. Martin of Tours
about 1440
Tempera and gold on canvas on panel

This tempera painting, made in the early Renaissance, is an example of perspective that looks a little "off." Each item in this painting, the altar, the screen in the Background, etc. is accurately represented, but put them all together and they don't quite fit.



ZOOM IN

PENNSYLVANIA ACADEMIC STANDARDS

Arts and Humanities

9.1.8.D. Demonstrate knowledge of at least two styles within each art form through the performance or exhibition of unique works.

9.3.8.C. Identify and classify styles, forms, types and genres within art forms.

Social Studies

7.3.6.D. Describe the human characteristics of places and regions by their economic acts.

7.4.6.D. Ways humans adjust the impact on the habitat.

MATERIALS

- LCD Projector or large display-sized reproductions of *Madonna and Child in Glory* (Jacopo di Cione), *Miraculous Mass of St. Martin of Tours* (Franconian School), *Madonna and Child with St. John* (Giuliano Bugiardini), *Adoration of the Shepherds* (Giovanni Agostino da Lodi), *Adoration of the Magi* (Kress Monogramist), *Bean Eater* (Annibale Carracci)
- Blackboard or white board
- A collection of online or postcard sized reproductions of paintings from the Middle Ages and Renaissance.

SOCIAL STUDIES LESSON

1. Setting the Stage

Explain to students that during the Middle Ages (a period of European history from the third through 13th centuries), art and learning were centered on the church and religion. But at the start of the 14th century, people became less interested in thinking about God, heaven and the saints, and more interested in thinking about themselves, their surroundings and their everyday lives. The values and ideals popular during the European Renaissance can be described by the term secular humanism: secular, meaning not religious and humanism, meaning placing the study and progress of human nature at the center of interests.

HUMANISM IN THE RENAISSANCE: SOCIAL STUDIES LESSON (continued)

The rise of Humanism during the Renaissance can be seen in paintings created by Renaissance artists. Explain to students that they will be learning how to tell the difference between paintings from the Renaissance and earlier works of art, just by looking for evidence in the paintings themselves. Works of art created in the Renaissance are primary sources of information about how people lived in Renaissance Europe. Explain that students will look for specific clues to make judgments about whether a painting is a Renaissance painting or not.

2. The Renaissance Connection

Show students a reproduction or projection of *Madonna and Child in Glory* (Jacopo di Cione). Explain that this is a very early example of Renaissance painting, containing many of the characteristics of paintings from the Middle Ages. Point out the halos around the heads of the figures in the paintings, a signal that they are residents of heaven. Write the word *halo* on the board. Point out that the pairs of saints and angels around the upper border of the painting are smaller than the Madonna and child in the center. Explain that this is called *hieratic scale*, which means making the most important figures in a work of art larger than less important figures. Write the word *hieratic scale* on the board.



Jacopa di Cione
Madonna and Child in Glory
1360/65
Tempera and gold on panel **ZOOM IN**



Franconian School
Miraculous Mass of Martin of Tours
about 1440
Tempera and gold on canvas on panel **ZOOM IN**

Show students a reproduction or projection of *Miraculous Mass of St. Martin of Tours* (Franconian School). Ask them to compare the background in this painting to the background in the painting they just saw. Explain that it was common during the Middle Ages for artists to use gold backgrounds to symbolize the holy atmosphere of heaven but artists in the Renaissance were less interested in heaven and much more interested in what the world around them looked like. Does St. Martin of Tours wear a halo? There are other saints in the background panel in this painting. Ask the students if they think this artist used Hieratic scale. Where? Why? Where are the figures in this painting? Do their surroundings look true to life? Why or why not?

Show students a reproduction or projection of *Madonna and Child with St. John* (Giuliano Bugiardini). Do these figures wear halos? How do they differ from the halos the students saw in the first painting? Ask students to describe the landscape surrounding these figures. Is the landscape heavenly or earthly? Write the word *landscape* on the board. Explain that as Renaissance interests changed from studying religion to studying natural sciences and human nature, the paintings created during the Renaissance changed too. In this painting, the holy family of the Madonna and baby Jesus with St. John live in the same world as ordinary people. Explain that this painting is made with



Guiliano Bugiardini
Madonna and Child with St. John, 1510
Oil on panel **ZOOM IN**

HUMANISM IN THE RENAISSANCE: SOCIAL STUDIES LESSON (continued)



Giovanni Agostino da Lodi
Adoration of the Shepherds
1510
Oil on panel



ZOOM IN

oil paint, invented during the Renaissance. Oil paint allowed artists to build up layers of paint that light could shine through, and allowed artists to represent light in a more believable way. Students might find it helpful to compare this painting with the first painting they saw, made of tempera paint, and list the differences in faces, folds of cloth and hair. Write the word *oil paint* on the board.

Show students a reproduction or projection of *Adoration of the Shepherds* (Giovanni Agostino da Lodi). Explain that this painting, made a little later than the others, shows the holy family of Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus, with shepherds on each side of the painting and an angel playing a lute at the center. Ask students whether this artist has used hieratic scale. Why or why not? Can students see any halos? Ask students if they think this painting is made with tempera paint or oil paint?

Show students a reproduction or projection of *Adoration of the Magi* (Kress Monogrammist). Ask students to examine



The Kress Monogrammist
The Adoration of the Magi
about 1550/1560
Oil on oak panel



ZOOM IN

the buildings in the background very carefully. Do they look true to life? Why or why not. Explain that mathematical formulas that allowed artists to represent space in paintings in a very believable way were invented during the Renaissance. We call this accurate perspective. Write *perspective* on the board. It may be helpful to have students compare the perspective in this painting with the perspective they saw in the earlier painting *Miraculous Mass of St. Martin of Tours* (Franconian School). Which looks more true to life? Why? Can the students find any halos in the *Adoration of the Magi* painting? Is there any hieratic scale at work? Where is there landscape in this painting? Did the artist use oil paint or tempera?

Can the students tell which figures are ordinary people in this painting and which are saints? Explain that Renaissance artists represented the interests in the culture they worked in and that the saints, heaven and the church began to be a part of everyday life, quite literally as this painting shows.



Annibale Carracci
The Bean Eater
1582/83
Oil on canvas



ZOOM IN

Show students a reproduction or projection of the *Bean Eater* (Annibale Carracci). Explain that this painting was made later in the Renaissance than any of the others the students have seen. While religious subjects remained popular during the Renaissance, for the first time in art history ordinary people also became worthy subjects for works of art. Can the students tell if the man in the painting is a saint? Is this painting an oil painting? How can students tell?

HUMANISM IN THE RENAISSANCE: SOCIAL STUDIES LESSON (continued)**3. Summary**

Give the students reproductions of a variety of paintings from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Students may work individually, in small groups or as a class. Ask them to put the reproductions in chronological order, using the criteria written on the board: halo, hieratic scale, landscape, oil paint, perspective. The background section of this lesson might serve as a handout to help students in this activity. Students who work individually may write an explanation for the chronology they create with the reproductions. If students work in small groups, each group may present and defend their chronology to the class.

4. Assessment

Were the students successful in ordering reproductions of works of art from the Middle Ages and Renaissance chronologically? Did the students refer to concepts learned in the lesson as criteria for their choices as they ordered the reproductions?

VOCABULARY

chronological: events arranged in the order in which they occurred.

egg tempera: colored pigments, ground into powder, and mixed with egg yolks to create paint.

halo: a ring or circle of light around the head of a saint in a religious painting.

hieratic scale: representing the sizes of things according to their importance, rather than how they would appear in the real world.

humanist: A scholar of the Renaissance who pursued the study and understanding of the ancient Greek and Roman empires. A person with a strong concern for human interests, values, and dignity.

landscape: natural scenery, such as trees, rocks, rivers, lakes, mountains, sky and clouds.

oil paint: Paint that is created by mixing oil with colored pigments that are ground into powder.

perspective: A variety of techniques used to create the illusion of three-dimensional space on a flat surface such as a painting or drawing.