

Italian Art History, in a Nutshell

Artsy Editors

Mar 25, 2014 11:14am

Italy has been a crucial center of discovery in art and culture, whether it be the many phases of the Renaissance or the exploration of new lands by Columbus and Vespucci. Rome itself, as Western civilization's political and religious capital, contains both the history of the Roman Empire and Christianity, earning the name "The Eternal City" by poets and writers. It's clear that we owe more to Italy than Vespas and pasta, as the country hosts some of the most stunning architecture ever built, from the Colosseum to Brunelleschi's Duomo to the Leaning Tower of Pisa. Beyond the over 100,000 monuments and museums that exist in Italy, art lovers find themselves at "The Floating City's" Venice Biennale every two years, traversing islands to see the best in contemporary art during each edition. Enjoy the fascinating, endlessly influential History of Italian Art in a nutshell.

Giotto di Bondone: Giotto has long been considered the first great artist of the Italian Renaissance, which began in the 14th-century. He is known for going against the Byzantine style of painting, giving weight, personality, and dimension to his subjects. His realistic work famously spans churches like the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua and the Florence Cathedral, influencing nearly every painter who came after him.

Masaccio: One such artist influenced by Giotto was Massacio, particularly with his work at the Brancacci Chapel, where the

famous fresco, *The Tribute Money*, resides. Known as the first great painter of the Italian Renaissance's Quattrocento period (15th-century), he innovated using linear perspective, vanishing points, and chiaroscuro to take realism even further than Giotto did.

Donatello: Trained as a goldsmith, Donatello is another Early Renaissance artist who realistically portrayed the body to express its pride and dignity in the 15th-century. He's more known for his youthful sculpture of David than he is for the brass pulpits at Old Sacristy of San Lorenzo, yet both show the impressive drama he was uniquely able to capture using perspectival illusionism.

Michelangelo Buonarroti: The term "Renaissance man" comes from one of the leading figures of the High Renaissance (1490s-1527), Michelangelo, who was a sculptor, painter, architect, and poet. Unlike many of his Renaissance predecessors, Michelangelo's life was long and well documented. Before he was even 30 years old, he made the iconic *Pietà* and *David* sculptures, followed by his best-known pieces, including *The Creation of Adam*, part of his masterful Sistine Chapel in Rome. At 74 years old, he became the architect of St. Peter's Basilica. It's no wonder he was called *Il Divino*, Italian for "the divine one," due to how prolific, influential, and accomplished he was in all the mediums he chose to pursue.

Leonardo da Vinci: As a key figure in the High Renaissance, and another true "Renaissance man," Leonardo da Vinci is remembered as a technical master who took his time to complete the best work possible. His job description is longer than Michelangelo's, adding musician, mathematician, engineer, inventor, geologist, cartographer, botanist, writer, and anatomist to

his résumé. Art historians and philosophers still ponder his *Vitruvian Man* drawing, and *Mona Lisa* and *The Last Supper* are some of the most iconic, recognizable art pieces of all time. The combination of his designs, theories, and groundbreaking paintings have formed the consensus that he was truly ahead of his time.

Raphael: Another leader of the High Renaissance, Raphael doubled as a painter and architect. While his influence wasn't as widespread as Michelangelo's, he was in high demand during his lifetime, especially by Popes, who commissioned him to design their apartments. He created masterful pieces at the Vatican Palace, including *The School of Athens*, which was a tribute to the artists and philosophers who inspired and defined the Renaissance, such as Leonardo da Vinci and Plato. Raphael may have been a nomadic character, but his impact on and place in the High Renaissance are definite.

Giorgio Vasari: Another "Renaissance man," Vasari penned one of the most important art historical documents in 1550, a series of artist biographies, titled *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, Architects*. He was more successful as an architect than as a painter and is best known for designing the structure of the Uffizi in Florence. Considered a Mannerist, he used less color in his work and was criticized for it at the time.

Caravaggio: One of the leaders of the Baroque movement (17th-century), Caravaggio was the king of drama and boldness. He advanced the usage of chiaroscuro into what would be called "Tenebrism," or rather, the dominance of darkness using dramatic illumination, in pieces such as *The Calling of St Matthew*. The

drama in his painterly style was also apparent in the scenes he depicted, from Goliath's severed head to overflowing still lifes.

Umberto Boccioni: Boccioni was a leading figure in the Futurist movement (early 20th-century), using painting and sculpture to express the excitement of the machine age. Futurism broke up subjects to re-examine them, like in Boccioni's *Unique forms of continuity in space* sculpture. By breaking down solid mass, Boccioni and his contemporaries departed from the realistic images of the past, using the body as a language to discuss technology, electricity, and innovation.

Lucio Fontana: Following movements that explored the future, metaphysics, and the representational Italian art of the past, Spatialism began to dominate the conversation. Founded by Lucio Fontana, the works in this movement, which took place in the 1940s and early '50s, examined the relationship between surface and dimensionality, later influencing performance art and environmental art. Fontana slashed his paintings, including *Concetto Spaziale, Attese*, in order to reject the process of formal easel painting and embrace new art forms.

Francesco Vezzoli: Following Arte Povera's conceptual, minimalist, and performance movement in the '60s and Transavantgarde in the '70s and '80s, contemporary Italian artists have found ways to reference the past while also looking forward. Francesco Vezzoli incorporates the Renaissance and Christianity into works with contemporary celebrities, whether it be Michelle Williams and Natalie Portman in a fake perfume advertisement or a portrait of Laura Bush and her dog. In 2010, he remade 15th- and 16th-century Madonna and Child paintings with Claudia Schiffer, Cindy Crawford, Truman Capote, and others.

