

Great Artists of the Italian Renaissance

(36 lectures, 30 minutes/lecture)

Course No. 7140

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"These Arts, in their highest province, are not addressed to the gross senses, but to the desires of the mind, to that spark of divinity which we have within."

—Sir Joshua Reynolds, 1786

No era of artistic achievement is as renowned as the Renaissance, and no country holds a higher place in that period than Italy. The supreme works created in Florence, Rome, Venice, and other Italian cities by such masters as Leonardo da Vinci, Botticelli, Michelangelo, Raphael, and Titian have never been equaled and have established a canon of beauty that pervades Western culture to this day.

To view these works is to enter a world that is incomparably rich, filled with emotion and drama that is palpable, though sometimes mysterious to our modern sensibility.

To study these works with an expert is to penetrate that mystery and gain a new appreciation for how these masterpieces were created and what they meant to the artists and people of the time.

Experience the Vision of Great Art with an Expert Guide

Professor William Kloss is your guide through this visual feast in an artist-centered survey that explores hundreds of different paintings and sculptures by scores of different artists.

An Independent Art Historian, scholar, and curator, Professor Kloss is a frequent lecturer for the Smithsonian Institution's seminar and travel program. He has served on the Committee for the Preservation of the White House by presidential appointment since 1990, and he is the author of several books and exhibition catalogs.

Commenting on Kloss's eloquent writing, *The Washington Post* marveled that "his pointed and persuasive perceptions are not easily resisted."

Unlock the Mysteries of Renaissance Art

Take Botticelli's *Primavera*, a bewitching allegory of springtime featuring two gods, three goddesses, the three Graces, and Cupid, set in a lush orange grove. Its sheer beauty transfixes visitors to Florence's Uffizi Gallery, where it hangs today. But what does it mean?

Noting that scholars have endlessly debated the painting's symbolism, Professor Kloss directs your attention to a few intriguing details:

- The orange tree foliage makes a halo around the central figure of Venus, connecting her with the Virgin Mary. According to Renaissance thought, Venus may also represent *humanitas*—culture or civilization.
- On the right, flowers float from the mouth of the nymph Cloris, and her finger is merging with a flower in the gown of Flora, goddess of spring. One is metamorphosing into the other as spring arrives in this ideal glade of divine love.
- Meanwhile on the left, Mercury is waving his staff to dispel a tiny patch of clouds. He is clearing the atmosphere—the intellect—for the three Graces who represent culture and the arts.

Professor Kloss then points out another equally rich interpretation and concludes, "A bad artist could do terrible things with such a complex story, but fortunately a great artist was at hand to visualize this elaborate subject."

The same can be said for all of the artists in this course, and it is through their distinctive styles, innovations, and matchless skill that you learn about this remarkable period.

What is the Renaissance?

These lectures cover the art historical periods known as the Early Renaissance and the High Renaissance, which extended from about 1400 to about 1520. Italy is the first and principal location of the Renaissance, and it was in Florence that it took its deepest root.

Renaissance means rebirth, and it is the name given to the transition from medieval to modern times in Europe, when the rediscovery of ancient Greek and Roman culture sparked a creative revolution in the humanities, the sciences, and the arts.

Humanism, a philosophical, literary, and artistic ideal, went hand in hand with this rebirth, emphasizing the dignity and potential of man and inspiring secular studies, and the creation of art that reflected the forms and ideas of the classical world. Renaissance society—and art—remained permeated with religion.

In the arts, this revolution encompassed powerful new techniques for representing the human figure and the visible world, and also new attitudes about the role of the artist in society. From a modest rank as craftsman, the artist gradually rose to a status comparable to that of poets and philosophers.

Examine Works by More Than 40 Great Artists

The first 25 lectures examine the artists of Central Italy, where Florence is located. The focus then shifts to Northern Italy. You cover the works of more than 40 artists. Among the most famous are:

- *Filippo Brunelleschi and Donatello*: One an architect, the other a sculptor, they were the principal founders of the Renaissance style. Florence cannot be properly understood

without looking at Brunelleschi's buildings, notably his dome for the Florence Cathedral. The influence of Donatello's sculpture was unequalled before that of Michelangelo.

- *Masaccio*: The greatest painter of the Early Renaissance is studied in two lectures, in which he is compared to Giotto, the great "proto-Renaissance" master of a century earlier.
- *Piero della Francesca*: Now considered one of the greatest of Renaissance painters, he was primarily associated with smaller urban centers like Urbino and Arezzo, where he created the fresco cycle *The Legend of the True Cross*.
- *Botticelli*: Two lectures are devoted to this master whose wistful grace gave way to anguished expression as the religious climate in Florence took a fanatical turn under the reformer Savonarola.
- *Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, and Raphael*: For many, this triumvirate is synonymous with the High Renaissance. Their influence and fame have scarcely waned from their day to our own. Seven lectures are devoted to their work.
- *Andrea Mantegna*: Master painter in Padua and Mantua, his art has a sculptural quality combined with rich color and a spirit of pathos. He was also an innovator in spatial illusionism in painting.
- *Carpaccio and Gentile Bellini*: This pair excelled in narrative cycles in which contemporary Venice is vividly rendered. They are included in an eight-lecture sequence on Venice, the proud center of culture in northern, Adriatic Italy.
- *Antonello da Messina and Giovanni Bellini*: Both working in Venice, they achieved such brilliant effects with the new oil medium that they inspired many other artists to adopt it. Giovanni Bellini was the younger brother of Gentile.
- *Giorgione and Titian*: From Giovanni Bellini's workshop came two artists who helped define the Venetian High Renaissance. Giorgione altered the development of Western art, despite his early death from the Plague, while Titian blended the achievements of Giorgione, central Italian painting, and his own coloristic genius into a style of stirring beauty.

Some of the Art You See

The visual content of this course puts it in a class with heavily illustrated art books. Some 500 images of paintings, sculptures, prints, drawings, maps, buildings, and architectural details are featured. Many works are explored in considerable depth, with searching commentary by Professor Kloss that is both enlightening and personal. For example:

- *Church of San Lorenzo*, Brunelleschi: "Brunelleschi's architecture reflects the scale of the human being. I have a greater sense of calm and comfort and well-being in that church than any other Italian church until we get to the work of Palladio well over 100 years later. It's an extraordinary experience."
- *St. George*, Donatello: "The widespread legs of the figure and the central axis of the shield lead us up to the head, the vigilant, intelligent head, a thinking head. We take it far too much for granted, but Donatello has been able to give the power of thought to the head of George."
- *Ginevra de' Benci*, Leonardo da Vinci: "The strangely unemotional character of the face, the dreamy eyes, don't really connect with ours. This seems to be more of a projection of Leonardo's own secretive personality than a record of the sitter's. I think that it is

generally true of portrait artists that they project themselves to a large degree onto their sitters."

- *Sistine Chapel Ceiling*, Michelangelo: "Do I think that the Sistine Ceiling was the victim of a poor or careless restoration? No, I do not; emphatically, I do not. These are the colors that we should have expected to see. These are in fact the colors of much later 16th-century Italian painting. We always knew that Michelangelo invented the poses of the human body that were used by everyone for the rest of the century. Now we know that he may have invented the colors as well."
- *Baldassare Castiglione*, Raphael: "Look in his eyes. Look at the wonderful blue-green of his eyes against the flesh tones and against the grayish background. The color scheme of the whole thing is a flawless consonance of gray, black, flesh tones, of perfectly defined volumes, persuasive description, and in every sense it's the true likeness of the man. It is what we call a speaking likeness."
- *The Tempest*, Giorgione: "This is one of the most puzzling paintings in art history. My preferred explanation: The soldier and the broken columns symbolize fortitude or constancy. The woman and child stand for Christian love. The threatening storm over the town and the country is a symbol of fortune or chance. What is distinctly uncommon here is the subordination of the emblematic devices to the evocative landscape. This is the first instance of Italian painting in which a landscape is given the principal role, not just a supporting role, but the principal role."

You discuss many other major masterpieces in detail, from Giotto's frescoes for the Arena Chapel and Ghiberti's bronze doors for the Florence Baptistery to Leonardo's *Last Supper* and Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*.

Terms and Techniques

Professor Kloss offers other insights as well. Did you know that it is incorrect to refer to Leonardo as "da Vinci," which is not his last name but the indication of his town of birth? Or that the Renaissance was put on hold for half a century due to the Black Death? Or that Renaissance marble sculpture was sometimes painted?

You also learn how to recognize saints from the symbols that accompany them: St. Paul by his sword, St. Peter by his keys, and St. Jerome by the stone in his hand with which he strikes himself in penance for his sins.

Of great use in your further studies are the terms and techniques that Professor Kloss explains:

- In Italian, the 14th century is called the *Trecento*. The literal meaning is three hundred, but it is shorthand for the one thousand three hundreds. Likewise, the 15th century is called the *Quattrocento*, and the 16th the *Cinquecento*. These Italian terms are commonly used in art historical writing and speaking about Italian art.
- *Fresco* means fresh in Italian. The technique involves painting on a shallow layer of freshly troweled wet plaster (the *intonaco*) with water-based pigments, which penetrate into the plaster. Rapid execution is required before the plaster sets overnight, allowing

one working day. The area that can be covered is thus called a *giornata* (day, or day's work).

- In linear or one-point perspective, the vanishing point corresponds to the spectator's viewpoint, and that is why the pictorial space can be felt as an extension of the viewer's real space. Leon Battista Alberti, the architect who first published a formulation of these principles in 1435, likened the picture surface to a window.
- Drying oils such as linseed oil and walnut oil form a solid film when exposed to the air for long enough time. Because they dry slowly, they can be applied evenly over a wide surface. The color, bound in the oil, has a richness and a luminosity that comes from the translucency of the medium.
- Uffizi, the name of the famous museum in Florence, means simply offices—the original function of the museum building.

The Renaissance: 120 Years That Transformed Art

In the final two lectures, Professor Kloss looks at the Renaissance as a whole and surveys the political, social, and religious events of the early 16th century that brought profound change to Italy and the rest of Europe. He then examines how art inevitably changed as a result.

Altogether, the Renaissance lasted about 120 years, and the period of the High Renaissance a little over 40 years. No later Western art can be discussed without reference to this era—especially as it matured and flourished in the cities of Italy.

Course Lecture Titles

Part 1

1. Italy and the Renaissance
2. From Gothic to Renaissance
3. Brunelleschi and Ghiberti in Florence
4. Donatello and Luca della Robbia
5. Masaccio
6. Masaccio—The Brancacci Chapel
7. Fra Angelico and Fra Filippo Lippi
8. Three Specialists
9. Donatello and Padua
10. Piero della Francesca—Individual Works
11. Piero della Francesca—Legend of the True Cross
12. Pageant of Life in Renaissance Florence

Part 2

13. The Heroic Nude
14. Sculpture Small and Large
15. Botticelli—Spirituality and Sensuality
16. Botticelli and the Trouble in Italy
17. Filippino Lippi
18. Leonardo da Vinci—Portraits and Altarpieces
19. Leonardo da Vinci—The Last Supper
20. Michelangelo—Florentine Works
21. Michelangelo—Roman Projects
22. Michelangelo—The Sistine Chapel Ceiling
23. Raphael—Madonnas and Portraits
24. Raphael—History Paintings

Part 3

25. Urbino—Microcosm of Renaissance Civilization
26. Andrea Mantegna in Padua and Mantua
27. Venice—Byzantine, Gothic, and Renaissance
28. Celebrating the Living City
29. Giovanni Bellini—The Early Years
30. Antonello da Messina and Giovanni Bellini
31. Giovanni Bellini—The Late Years
32. Giorgione
33. Giorgione or Titian?
34. Titian—The Early Years
35. A Culture in Crisis
36. The Renaissance Reformed