

# The Beginnings of Modern Art Traditions

## Vocabulary

Renaissance  
Mannerism  
Baroque  
Rococo

At the beginning of the fifteenth century, the Middle Ages began drawing to a close. The invention of the printing press and the European exploration of the Americas and the Pacific Ocean expanded knowledge and contributed to the dawn of a new era. As the culture changed, so did the art. During the Middle Ages, most art had been made for religious reasons. Even artworks made for wealthy people, such as illuminated books, most often depicted religious subject matter. During the next period, artists continued to paint religious subjects but also expanded their repertoire to include mythological and secular, or nonreligious, themes.

## Renaissance

Renaissance (**ren-uh-sahns**) is a French word for “rebirth.” **Renaissance** is the name given to the period at the end of the Middle Ages when artists, writers, and philosophers were “re-awakened” to art forms and ideas from ancient Greece and Rome. The Renaissance did not happen all at once, nor did it spread to all parts of Europe at the same time. Rather, it dawned gradually, first in Italy, then spreading through northern Europe, finally reaching France and England. Along with a new appreciation of classical antiquity, social structures also changed. Kings and popes, who had always been extremely powerful, had competition from bankers and merchants, whose wealth also equaled political power. The authority of the Catholic Church was challenged by Renaissance scholars and artists who sought to understand the natural world through science and reason.

## Italian Renaissance

An architect named Filippo Brunelleschi (**fee-leep-poh brew-nell-less-key**) developed linear perspective, a graphic system that creates the illusion of depth and volume on a flat surface. Linear perspective provided a set of guidelines that allowed artists to depict figures and objects in space on a two-dimensional surface. This system made the placement of objects, and the depiction of their volume or form, measurable and exact, which gave an exciting illusion of reality to works of art. Italian artists sought to create realistic and lifelike works. They studied the classical art of Greece and Rome and meticulously observed and recorded the world around them.

Michelangelo Buonarroti (**my-kel-an-jay-loh bwon-nar-roh-tee**), an Italian artist, was a master of poetry, painting, sculpture, and architecture. However, he always thought of himself primarily as a sculptor. One of his most famous works is **Figure 13.8**, *Pietà*. A *pietà* is a work showing Mary mourning over the body of Christ.

**MEET THE  
ARTIST**

**MICHELANGELO  
BUONARROTI**



*Italian, 1475–1564*

Marcello Venusti. *Portrait of Michelangelo*. Casa Buonarroti, Florence, Italy.

Born in a small village near Florence, Italy in 1475, Michelangelo was apprenticed to a painter when he was 13. While still a teen, he joined the Medici household, a powerful ruling family. There he met many prominent Florentine citizens, artists, and philosophers. In 1494, the Medici family was overthrown and Michelangelo was forced to flee. He traveled to Rome, where many classical statues and buildings were being discovered. He eagerly studied their formal qualities and proportions.

Michelangelo created many masterpieces, mostly on a grand scale. When Pope Julius II asked Michelangelo to design a tomb for him, Michelangelo devised a design calling for 40 sculptures, only a few of which were completed before Pope Julius decided not to spend any more money. Instead, he asked Michelangelo to paint the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican. The chapel had a rounded ceiling high above the floor. Michelangelo was insulted at being asked to paint a ceiling, which was not considered a very prestigious assignment. He also did not know how he could paint a ceiling so far off the ground. However, the pope insisted and Michelangelo gave in. He built a high scaffold and lay on it to paint the wet ceiling plaster. He created nine different sections on the ceiling, each telling a Biblical story, including the creation of the world.

► **FIGURE 13.8** Notice the proportions of the two figures in this sculpture. Mary is much larger than her son. Michelangelo did this on purpose so that she would not seem overwhelmed by her son's body. What feeling does this proportion convey?

Michelangelo. *Pietà*. c. 1500. Marble. 174 cm (5'8½") high; base 195 cm (6'4½") high. Vatican, St. Peter's Basilica, Rome, Italy.



Like Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci (lay-oh-**nar**-doh da **vin**-chee) studied and mastered a broad range of disciplines, including mathematics, physics, geography, and painting. Although he had many ideas, Leonardo often left paintings and sculptures unfinished because he was not happy with them. A page from one of his sketchbooks is shown in Figure 3.2 on page 42.

Women first achieved fame as artists during the Renaissance. They had to overcome political, social, and economic obstacles to achieve artistic success. One of them, Sofonisba Anguissola, was the first Italian woman to gain wide recognition as an artist. The oldest of seven children, her father encouraged her to pursue art and allowed her to study with local artists. He even wrote to Michelangelo to tell him about Sofonisba's skills. Michelangelo responded with kind words of encouragement and

a drawing for her to copy and study as part of her training. Much of her early work consisted of portraits of her family and herself (**Figure 13.9**). She also painted religious subjects. As her fame spread, the king of Spain asked her to join his court, where she painted many portraits and enjoyed respect and admiration as a court painter.

## Northern Renaissance

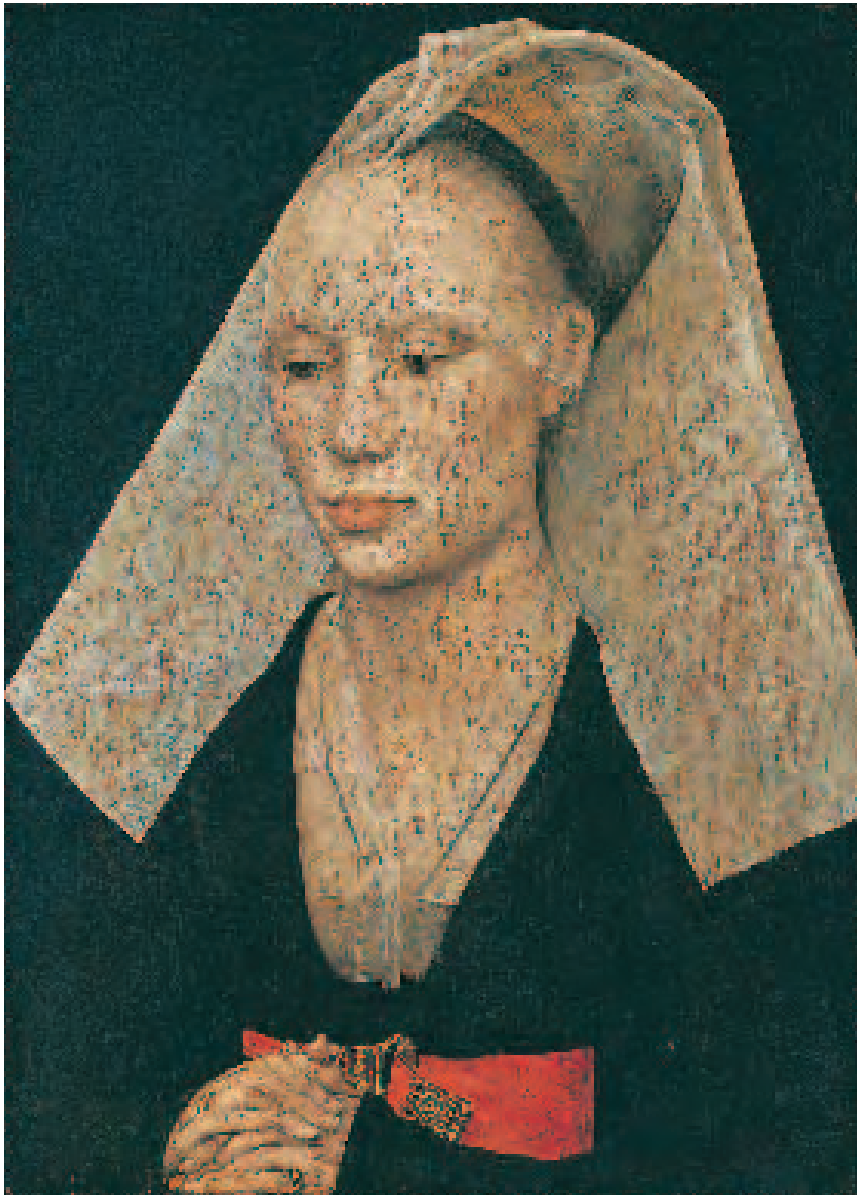
The changes that took place during the Renaissance in Italy later filtered into northern European countries such as Flanders (a region in Belgium) and Germany. Flemish artists (those from Flanders) began to use oil rather than egg to bind their pigments. This new medium allowed artists more versatility than ever before.

Northern artists had little interest in recreating the classical art of Greece and Rome. They placed greater emphasis on



▲ **FIGURE 13.9** Notice the dramatic use of color in this painting. Observe the detail of the dresses the sisters are wearing. What does this tell you about them and their social status?

Sofonisba Anguissola. *A game of chess, involving the painter's three sisters and a servant*. 1555. Oil on canvas. 72 × 97 cm (28½ × 38½"). Muzeum Narodowe, Poznan, Poland.



◀ **FIGURE 13.10** At first, this portrait of a well-to-do woman appears to be a realistic portrayal. If you look closely, however, you will see that her waist, as indicated by the red band, is about the same size as her head. Her head is elongated, which is emphasized by the severely pulled back hair. Do you think these odd proportions are natural? Why would the artist paint her this way if she did not look like this?

Rogier van der Weyden. *Portrait of a Lady*. c. 1460. Oil on panel, painted surface. 34 × 25.5 cm (13<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 10<sup>1</sup>/<sub>16</sub>”). National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. © 1998 Board of Trustees. Andrew W. Mellon Collection.

depicting the accurate and precise details such as an intricate design on clothing or the details of the environment. Symbolism became even more important. Images in art conveyed more than just one meaning.

The art of Jan van Eyck (**yahn** van **eyek**) and his successors made Flanders the center of the Northern art world. Like other Northern painters, Jan van Eyck emphasized precision and accuracy. Look at Figure 9.8 on page 231. Notice the attention to detail, such as the lace on the woman's headcovering and the carpet under the bed. The picture includes many symbols. For example, the wedding couple is shown

barefoot to symbolize that they are standing on holy ground. The burning candle indicates the presence of God. The little dog stands for loyalty.

The work of Jan van Eyck influenced another important Northern Renaissance painter, Rogier van der Weyden (**roh-jehr** van duhr **vy-duhn**). Like van Eyck, he paid meticulous attention to detail. Look at **Figure 13.10**. Notice the pins in the subject's veil and the intricate design on her belt buckle.

As is often the case, changes in society brought about changes in artistic expression. In the mid-sixteenth century, religious reformers challenged the authority of the Catholic Church, causing conflict





▲ **FIGURE 13.11** Notice the dreamlike quality of the background. It causes the viewer to focus on the two figures in the foreground. What appears to be happening in this painting?

El Greco. *Saint Martin and the Beggar*. 1597/1599. Oil on canvas; wooden strip added at bottom. 193.5 × 103 cm (76<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 40<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>"). National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. © 1998 Board of Trustees. Widener Collection.

and turmoil. Great artists like Leonardo and Michelangelo had died, leaving behind a vacuum in artistic inspiration and innovation. Artists began showing the tension and struggle they experienced during this period of crisis in their art. The result was an artistic style called **Mannerism**, which featured highly emotional scenes and elongated figures. The style was developed by certain artists to be a deliberate shift away from the ideals and perfect forms of Renaissance art. If Renaissance artists preferred balance and harmony, Mannerists preferred imbalance and dynamic movement.

One of the most famous Mannerist artists was El Greco (el **gr**eh-koh). His name means “the Greek,” for his birthplace on the Greek island of Crete. Because of his unusual style, El Greco found it difficult to secure patronage. In 1577, he traveled to Toledo, Spain, where he spent the rest of his life. There he gained a reputation as a superior artist. **Figure 13.11** shows the intense emotionalism and strong sense of movement characteristic of El Greco’s work.

## The Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries

A reform movement known as the Protestant Reformation, which began in the sixteenth century, caused many people to depart from the teachings of the Catholic Church. In order to gain them back, the Church started its own reform movement, known as the Counter-Reformation, in the seventeenth century. Art was an important part of this movement. Catholic Church authorities called upon artists to create works that would inspire renewed religious feelings in viewers.

## Baroque Art in Italy

A new art style developed as a result of the Counter-Reformation. **Baroque** (buh-**roh**k) is *an art style emphasizing dramatic lighting, movement, and emotional intensity*. The leader of the Baroque style in Italy, a young painter named Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (my-kel-an-jay-loh mah-ree-see dah kar-uh-**vah**-jyoh), depicted light in a daring new way. *The Conversion of St. Paul* (**Figure 13.12**), shows only St. Paul, his horse, and an attendant. The figures fill the

canvas. Nothing distracts the viewer from the scene. Although the religious meaning may not be apparent at first, Caravaggio's mysterious use of light dramatizes the scene. This dramatic use of light and dark is also evident in the art of one of his followers, Artemisia Gentileschi (see Figure 5.17 on page 111).

## Dutch Art

Dutch Protestants did not want religious paintings and sculptures in their churches. Dutch artists had to turn to



◀ **FIGURE 13.12** Notice the use of light in this picture. It is not a natural light. Where does it come from? What mood is created by it?

Caravaggio. *The Conversion of St. Paul*. c. 1601. Oil on canvas. Approx. 228.6 × 175.3 cm (90 × 69"). Santa Maria del Popolo, Rome, Italy.



ordinary people and places for their subject matter. The demand for landscapes, portraits, and still lifes grew as wealthy merchants surrounded themselves with art that depicted scenes of everyday life. The greatest Dutch artist of this period was Rembrandt van Rijn (**rem**-brant van **reyn**). Like other Dutch artists, he painted ordinary people and everyday events. He was somewhat unusual, however, in that he also continued painting religious subjects. He was especially interested in the psychological character of the people he portrayed, suggested by his use of light and shadow to create atmosphere. *Aristotle with a Bust*

*of Homer* (Figure 5.36, page 124) is considered one of the grandest Rembrandts because of its rich use of color and texture. The texture of the gold chain is depicted in three-dimensional relief because of the thickness of the paint.

Jan Vermeer (yahn vair-**meer**) is another important Dutch artist. For several hundred years, his artwork remained unappreciated, but in the second half of the nineteenth century critics recognized his artistic genius. Vermeer is best known for his use of light and texture. **Figure 13.13** shows his talent in using dark and light values to express a feeling or evoke a mood.



► **FIGURE 13.13**  
This portrait depicts an ordinary woman engaged in an everyday activity. How does Vermeer add interest to the painting? What mood or feeling does it evoke?

Jan Vermeer. *Girl with the Red Hat*. c. 1665/1666. Oil on panel. 23.1 × 18.1 cm (9<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 7<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub>”). National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. © 1998 Board of Trustees. Andrew W. Mellon Collection.

## Rococo Style

As the seventeenth century ended and the eighteenth century began, France emerged as the strongest, wealthiest nation in Europe. Paris, its capital, became the center of the art world. When pleasure-loving King Louis XIV assumed the throne, a new style of art influenced by his lighthearted personality arose. Called **Rococo** (ruh-koh-koh), it is *an art style that expresses free, graceful movement, playful use of line, and delicate colors.*

One of the first painters working in the Rococo style was Antoine Watteau

(an-twahn wah-toh). His paintings depict an idealized world filled with happy, carefree people (**Figure 13.14**).

In England, artists modified the Rococo style. They used its delicate, light-washed techniques but rejected artificial subject matter. One of the most famous English painters of this period, Thomas Gainsborough (**gainz-bur-roh**), began his artistic career as a landscape painter but later became a famous portrait painter for members of English high society.



▲ **FIGURE 13.14** Describe the dress and manners of these people. Notice how the colors and shapes blend together for a dreamlike, misty quality. Is this a happy occasion? How do you know?

Antoine Watteau. *Embarkation for Cythera*. 1717–19. Oil on canvas. 1.3 × 1.9 m (4' 3" × 6' 4½"). The Louvre, Paris, France.



► **FIGURE 13.15** The most striking element of this painting is the use of color. What does the background depict? Do you think it is important to the painting?

Thomas Gainsborough. *The Blue Boy*. c. 1770. Oil on canvas. 177.8 × 121.9 cm (70 × 48"). The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens, San Marino, California.



**Figure 13.15**, Gainsborough's most famous painting, resulted from a professional rivalry. A rival painter gave a lecture at the Royal Academy of Art and stated that blue, a cool color, should always be used in the background, never in the main part of a picture. When Gainsborough heard this, he considered it a challenge and painted a portrait of a boy dressed entirely in blue.

In Spain, Francisco Goya (frahn-seese-koh **goh**-ya) transformed Rococo art. Early in his career, Goya achieved

considerable fame and fortune painting in the Rococo style. However, this changed after he suffered a serious illness and, later, a grave accident. He lost his hearing and endured other physical setbacks. A war in Spain made him aware of the suffering of others. He found he was no longer comfortable painting in the decorative Rococo fashion.

Goya's art reflected his bitterness and disillusionment. One of his most famous paintings shows the ugliness and brutality of war (**Figure 13.16**).



▲ **FIGURE 13.16** The figures are arranged in this painting so that they seem in opposition to each other. Which is the most important figure in this composition? How has the figure been made to stand out? What is the feeling or mood of the piece?

Francisco Goya. *The Third of May, 1808*. 1814. Oil on canvas. Approx. 2.64 × 3.43 m (8'8" × 11'3"). Museo del Prado, Madrid, Spain.

## Activity

### Analyzing an Artwork

#### Selecting and Analyzing Artworks for Historical and Cultural Contexts.

Select one work of art from the Renaissance or Baroque periods. Use the four steps of the art history method discussed in Chapter 2 to form conclusions about the historical or cultural context of the work. You may need to research the work or art and the artist in an encyclopedia, art history books, or online resources. Write your analysis in your sketchbook.



### Check Your Understanding

1. What is linear perspective?
2. What medium used by Flemish artists revolutionized painting in the Renaissance?
3. Compare and contrast the historical styles in Figure 13.10 on page 359 and Figure 13.11 on page 360. Identify the general trends in art.
4. What style of painting is characterized by contrast and variety?
5. List the characteristics of Rococo art.