

Art History - What made the Renaissance artistically different? Discuss with reference to one artistic medium: painting, architecture, sculpture.

(1999 words)

The Italian Renaissance was undoubtedly a period of huge cultural transformation, witnessing a revival of philosophical and mathematical classical ideals which were reflected within the art, departing from the intellectual and stylistic constraints of medieval artistry. This essay will focus on the painterly trends of quattro and cinquecento Italy, comparing them on factors such as content, material, style, thinking, and motivation to both pre- and post-Renaissance Italy, as well as adjacent European artistic cultures, with an aim to explain and evaluate their uniqueness.

Firstly, while the frequency of religious subjects in Renaissance works makes Christianity's artistic influence obvious, the institution of Catholicism had important motives of its own which manifested themselves in the art of the period. Following the instability of the Avignon era and the Great Western Schism (where French political pressure led to the relocation of the papal court to the southeast of France and successive, conflicting claims to the position of Pope which led to 40 years of religious factionalism and chaos), the new string of popes with their newfound unified authority strove to reassert Rome's pre-eminence as the Christian capital via artistic forms (including painting, which this essay will focus upon.)¹ However, as Cesareo argues in his essay 'The Complex Nature of Catholicism in the Renaissance', this was not the simplistic, uncompromising devotional imagery of the medieval period, and this is easily supported by comparing works of the time to that of the Renaissance.²



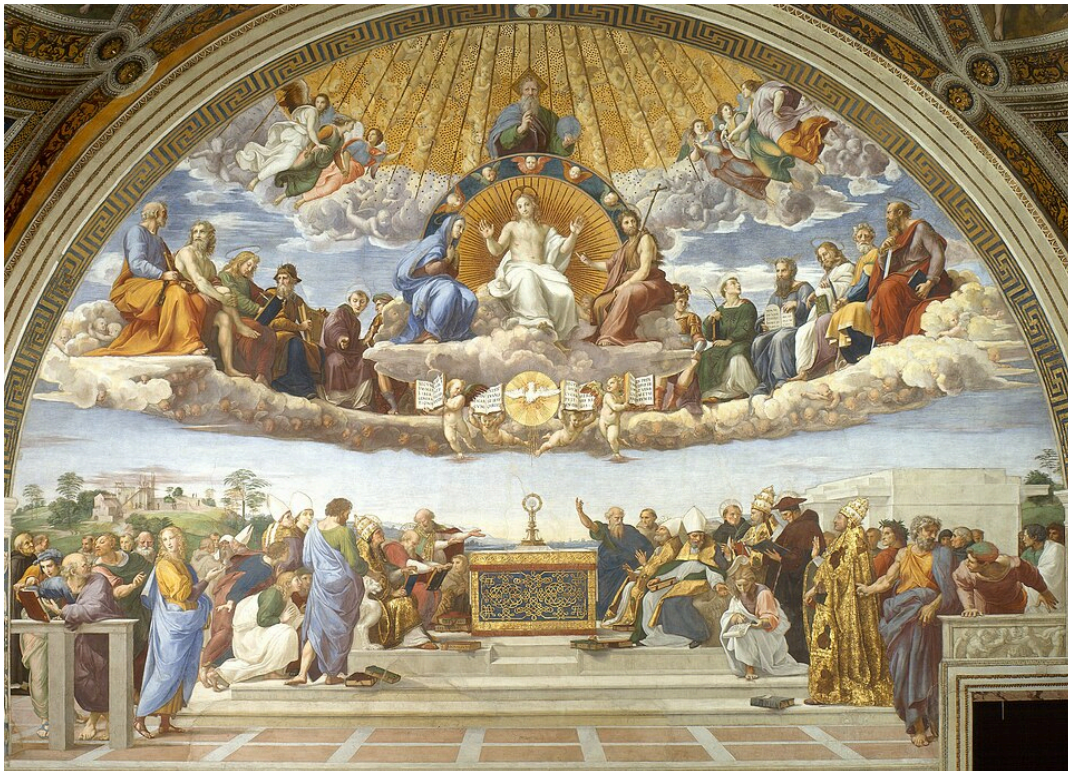
'Maestà of Duccio', Duccio di Buoninsegna, 1308-1311

¹ Michael Morris, "The Papacy during the Renaissance - the Metropolitan Museum of Art," Metmuseum.org, August 2007, <https://www.metmuseum.org/essays/the-papacy-during-the-renaissance>.

² Francesco C. Cesareo, "The Complex Nature of Catholicism in the Renaissance," *Renaissance Quarterly* 54, no. 4-Part2 (2001): 1561-73, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1262162>.

For example, this typical medieval altarpiece from the trecento serves basic liturgic purposes, providing an intuitive focus of devotional sentiment for churchgoers and common worship, via the utilisation of traditional visual imagery associated with the hyperdulia. It also functions as a symbol of political and cultural dominance, being commissioned for the city of Siena and acting as a propagandistic tool to assert pre-eminence in their Tuscan power struggle with neighbouring Florence.³

However, looking forward to the cinquecento, Catholic understanding intersected with Renaissance culture and, in particular, humanist thinking,⁴ a change in religious sentiments which would manifest itself in the papacy's visual language. The intersectional prosperity which emerged as a result of the mass economic growth of quattrocento Italy led to the displacement of the high didacticism offered by elitist and esoteric scholasticism in favour of humanism⁵ and the embracement of classical literature, art, rhetoric, and philosophy, advocating for the assertion⁶ of the primacy of the individual in contrast to the traditional strict piety associated with the church, creating a generation of paintings which, equally continued in ecclesiastical traditions of visualising biblical stories, instructing the illiterate, and exciting devotional sentiments, but which also embraced new philosophical customs.



‘Disputation of the Holy Sacrament’, Raphael, 1509-1510

³ Emeil Kren and Daniel Marx, “Analysis of the Maesta by Duccio,” [www.wga.hu](http://www.wga.hu/tours/siena/analysis1.html), n.d., <https://www.wga.hu/tours/siena/analysis1.html>.

⁴ Francesco C. Cesareo, “The Complex Nature of Catholicism in the Renaissance,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 54, no. 4-Part2 (2001): 1561–73, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1262162>.

⁵ Leibell J F, “THE CHURCH during the RENAISSANCE,” *Blackfriars* 5, no. 56 (1924): 474–83, <https://doi.org/10.2307/44244008>.

⁶ Aditi Bikash Sarma, “TRACING the EVOLUTION and NATURE of HUMANISM,” Research Gate, May 13, 2023, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/370750445_TRACING_THE_EVOLUTION_AND_NATURE_OF_HUMANISM.



‘The School of Athens’, Raphael, 1509-1510

Raphael’s diptych of Apostolic Palace frescos is particularly emblematic of this. The first is overtly religious in its themes, showcasing typical Christian hierarchy with the positioning of a transcendent scene of heaven above Earth. The latter work is set firmly in the human domain, with the subject of classical philosophers and setting within Vitruvian principled-architecture working as a celebration of humanist thinking and secular knowledge. However, its grounding in the mortal realm and compositional restraint from the heavens, whose holy omniscient and omnipotent nature is delineated and shown by the exclusive use of gold throughout the two pieces to depict the divine, reconciles this with holy doctrine.⁷ The Pope’s commission of this for the newly renovated Stanze marks a continuation of papal utilisation of art as a means of power projection, but is also symbolic of the shift in mindset of the Church and their embrace of classicism and humanist principles as complementary and amelioratory to religious understanding, and evidences the effects of Catholic institutional progression on the art of a period, artistic changes which would materialise frequently in the many painterly commissions of the papacy.

The comparison of these works is also useful for demonstrating the profound shift in material witnessed during the Renaissance. While Italy’s Byzantine influence had proliferated Medieval Italy’s ‘maniera greco’ style⁸ and pushed a focus onto the incorporation of gilding and adoption of

⁷ Mirzam Perez and Aysha Pollnitz, “School of Athens and Disputation of the Holy Sacrament · Origins of a Liberal Education · Origins of Liberal Education,” Grinnell.edu, 2024, <https://www.originsliberaleducation.sites.grinnell.edu/exhibits/show/origins/schoolofathens>.

⁸ Jennifer Sarathy, “Proto-Renaissance in Italy (1200–1400),” Art History Teaching Resources, December 6, 2014, <https://arthistoryteachingresources.org/lessons/the-proto-renaissance-in-italy-1200-1400/>.

tempera paint,⁹ the advent of the quattrocento marked a shift in emphasis from the incorporation of rich materials like ultramarine and gold to more realistic demonstrations of pictorial skill, as better fulfilling Naturalist desires for accurate depictions of the world (as an extension of humanism, and desires for truth, and scientific inquiry into the body and self.)¹⁰ As the great Genoan thinker Alberti, in his treatise ‘Della Pittura’, said, ‘to represent the glitter of gold with plain colours brings the craftsman more admiration and praise’,¹¹ which is particularly emblematic of the transformation of Renaissance ideals, from raw incorporation of physical features of wealth to demonstrations of artistic skill and ability which store and delineate value in a new and more sophisticated manner. Baxandall in ‘Painting and experience in Fifteenth Century Italy’ pointed out how patrons began to request landscapes behind the figures, or more of the master's personal attention rather than gilding,¹² a trend which supports this idea and can be seen in works like Ghirlandaio’s Adoration, for example, where the contract explicitly states he ‘is to color and paint the said panel all with his own hand in the manner shown in a drawing on paper with those figures and in that manner shown in it, in every particular according to what I, Fra, Bernardo, (the master) think best.’¹³



‘Adoration of the Magi’, Domenico Ghirlandaio, 1485 - 1488

⁹ Jennifer Meagher, “Italian Painting of the Later Middle Ages - the Metropolitan Museum of Art,” Metmuseum.org, September 2010,

<https://www.metmuseum.org/essays/italian-painting-of-the-later-middle-ages>.

¹⁰ Artsology, “The Revival of Naturalism in Art during the Renaissance,” The Artsology Blog, November 13, 2023, <https://artsology.com/blog/2023/11/the-revival-of-naturalism-in-art-during-the-renaissance/>.

¹¹ Leon Battista Alberti, *Della Pittura* (United States: The Perfect Library, 2016).

¹² Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style* (Oxford Oxfordshire ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1972).

¹³ Guest Author, “A Peek into the Masters’ Workshops: How Artists Worked in the Italian Renaissance,” DailyArt Magazine, September 5, 2024, <https://www.dailyartmagazine.com/italian-renaissance-masters-workshops/>.

It is also worth noting when evaluating the papal influence on the development of the Renaissance that the religious methodology of Catholicism offsets Italian art from the artistic movements of states of other denominations. It was within this cinquecento context that Luther nailed his Ninety-Five theses to the door of Wittenberg Cathedral, and states like Germany, England, and Switzerland adopted Protestantism. Looking to it's reluctant approach to the theological premise of material representation as a medium of divinity,¹⁴ and French theologian and influential reformer John Calvin's uncompromising denial of it, it's easy to see how theological disparities created an artistic schism between European spheres. The Dutch golden age, which stemmed from newfound independence and the establishment of a Calvinist state free from the ideological constraints of Spanish Habsburg rule in the late cinquecento, for example, with the absence left by the Church, created an open market, dependent on individual patrons, producing specialised secular genres like landscapes and still life through the medium of portable and less substantial easel-painting,¹⁵ in contrast to the massive, costly commissions of the papacy.



‘Landscape with Waterfall’, Jacob van Ruisdael, 1660s

As well as integrating with religion, the great return to classicism led to hugely significant stylistic development, as well as a new genre of painting. While religious art would maintain its dominance throughout the Renaissance, the conditions, including monastic rediscovery of classical texts, spread of literacy, and the invention of the printing press in 1440, coalesced to provide fertile ground for the reawakening of classical literature and mythology,¹⁶ one which Brenner encapsulates as ‘mythology

¹⁴ Ndidzulafhi Mudau, “The Protestant Reformation’s Challenge to Religious Iconography and Sacred Art,” *HTS Theologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 81, no. 1 (November 18, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v81i1.10945>.

¹⁵ Jason Gaiger, “Dutch Painting of the Golden Age,” Open Learning, 2018, <https://www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/dutch-painting-the-golden-age/content-section-0?intro=1>.

¹⁶ Robert Wilde and Medieval Studies B. A., “The Renaissance Started with the Reintroduction of Ancient Texts,” ThoughtCo, September 7, 2018, <https://www.thoughtco.com/causes-of-the-renaissance-1221930>.

of men and anthropomorphic gods',¹⁷ and so which naturally meshed with humanist principles of the primacy of man. This gave impetus to the a new secular genre of 'all'antica' painting, appropriating hellenic and latinate subjects to construct mythological scenes.¹⁸



Bacchus and Ariadne, Titian, 1520 - 1523

Here, for example, Titian similarly combines Ovidian and Catullian influence to depict the story of Theseus and his abandoned lover, making use of pagan imagery like the caper flowers scattered in the foreground to communicate her longing and pain.¹⁹ (This piece also draws attention to another element of Renaissance uniqueness in its chromatic innovation, with Titian's innovation in the Venetian convention of 'colorito' and emphasis on colour as a primary means of expression marking a departure from the pre-Renaissance perspective of it as an embellishing feature secondary to form and 'disegno.'²⁰)

¹⁷ Carla Mckinney Brenner, Julie Warnement, and Art U.S, *The Inquiring Eye : Classical Mythology in European Art : Teaching Packet* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery Of Art, 1996).

¹⁸ Luba Freedman, "Classical Myths in Italian Renaissance Painting," assets.cambridge.org, n.d., https://assets.cambridge.org/97811070/01190/excerpt/9781107001190_excerpt.htm.

¹⁹ The National Gallery, London, "Primary Teachers' Notes: Bacchus and Ariadne by Titian," 2009, https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/media/13681/notes_titian-bacchus-ariadne.pdf.

²⁰ WahooArt.com, "Titian: Innovation, Technique & the Venetian Renaissance Portrait Tradition," Wahooart.com (WahooArt.com, October 24, 2025), <https://wahooart.com/en/articles/titian-innovation-technique-the-venetian-renaissance-portrait-tradition-en/>.

However, classicism extends beyond the great literature and stories of antiquity. A return to Hellenic advances in arithmetic, like that of the Neoplatonic and Hermeticist tracts²¹ was stimulated by the same stimuli which grew the literature of Ovid and Catullus, and these geometric principles took hold of wider Renaissance society (in areas of commerce and trade), as well as artistically, in particular, in terms of composition.



‘The Tribute Money’, Masaccio, 1425

This Massacio emblematises this via the utilisation of triangular arrangements to create the natural aesthetic harmony in the visual composition that artists of the period strove for, and linear perspective to create spatial depth and converge the lines of sight to the subject of Jesus, applying scientific tenets to enhance artistic expression.

It’s also representative of stylistic change, with the abandonment of flat Gothic styling in favour of the new goal of realism, via sfumato and chiaroscuro to model shadows and create tangible weight and depth.

These principles are also key parts of what contrasts art of the period from later movements like the Baroque, which abandoned balance and harmony to embrace a sheer and obsessive chiaroscuro and tenebrism,²² creating high drama and excessive theatricality which aligned with the period’s rich religious fervour, fulfilling further arts’ pastoral role out of desperate counter-reformation desires to reassert authority through the Church’s outlined ideals of ‘direct emotional involvement.’²³

²¹ Alistair Kwan, “Renaissance (Mathematical History) | EBSCO,” EBSCO Information Services, Inc. | www.ebsco.com, 2022, <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/history/renaissance-mathematical-history>.

²² “Baroque Style | Famous Artists & Paintings | Christie’s,” Christies.com (Christie’s, 2020), <https://www.christies.com/en/art-movement/baroque>.

²³ Richard Viladesau, “Counter-Reformation Theology and Art: The Example of Rubens’s Paintings of the Passion,” *Toronto Journal of Theology* 28, no. 1 (January 1, 2012): 29–42, <https://doi.org/10.1353/tjt.2012.0013>.



‘The Tribute Money’, Peter Paul Rubens, 1610-1615

This Seicento depiction of the same subject perhaps best exemplifies and visualises the difference.

The economic shifts of the period also had huge effects on the system of patronage, and hence on the separation of Renaissance painting from that of other times and regions. Firstly, the Italian states’ economies were developing. Port cities like Venice took advantage of the weak state of the Byzantine Empire following the Fourth Crusade to become the pre-eminent facilitators of trade between Europe and the East, while Florence became the dominant global banking force, with modern commercial infrastructure and their instigation of the supranational currency of the florin,²⁴ positioning the major (and in particular the Northern) Italian states in a place of relative economic advance compared to Northern Europe’s traditional feudal agrarianism. Goldthwaite, in his essay ‘Preconditions for Luxury Consumption’, argues this huge acquisition of wealth conflated with demographical change, as the Black Death and other plagues scourged Europe, producing a numerically smaller population with a much higher proportion of the results of this economic growth, structured not feudally, but distributed intersectionally amongst a growing mercantile class, creating a new, larger and ever wealthier consumer base, which, to link these socio-economic conditions back to a painterly perspective, would fuel the artistic industries, purchasing paintings which fulfilled Veblen’s concept of conspicuous consumption (in contrast to the medieval period where the church and papal institutions dominated commissions.)²⁵ This idea is supported by Florentine merchant and patron

²⁴ M. Fratianni and F. Spinelli, “Italian City-States and Financial Evolution,” *European Review of Economic History* 10, no. 3 (December 1, 2006): 257–78, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1361491606001754>.

²⁵ Richard A. Goldthwaite, “The Economy of Renaissance Italy: The Preconditions for Luxury Consumption,” *I Tatti Studies in the Italian Renaissance* 2 (January 1987): 15–39, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4603651>.

Rucellai's motives for art, which he documented in his 'Zibaldone', labelling their service of the 'honour of the city, and the commemoration of myself' as the 'greatest contentment and pleasure', and an outlet for the 'pleasure and virtue of spending money well.'²⁶



‘Adoration of the Magi’, Sandro Botticelli, 1475 - 1476

While desires of displaying prestige and political influence through art were not unique to Renaissance art, mercantile, secular commissions gave way to a series of new artistic motifs seen in Botticelli's work here, like the integration of patron and banking giant Cosimo de' Medici, as well as his children Piero and Giovanni into the scene,²⁷ as well as the wider spread and democratisation of the genre of portraiture, reflecting this new interest in individual identity.²⁸ This painting also demonstrates another effect of this new market in the rise of artistic status from a craftsman, an institutional tool of the church and aristocracy, to that of an intellectual, and collaborator of the patron rather than a mere subordinate, leading to a commonplace action of artistic self-integration,

²⁶ Giovanni Rucellai, *Zibaldone*, n.d.

²⁷ Daniela Parenti, “Adoration of the Magi by Sandro Botticelli | Artworks | Uffizi Galleries,” www.uffizi.it, n.d., <https://www.uffizi.it/en/artworks/botticelli-adoration-lami>.

²⁸ Jean Sorabella, “Portraiture in Renaissance and Baroque Europe - the Metropolitan Museum of Art,” Metmuseum.org, August 2007, <https://www.metmuseum.org/essays/portraiture-in-renaissance-and-baroque-europe>.

realised here by Botticelli's instigation of himself looking to the view on the far right side of this painting, functioning almost as a festaiolo figure.²⁹

Overall then, the Renaissance witnessed profound cultural change which manifested itself within the arts with a truly unique artistic language and cognitive style.

²⁹ Lydia Collier-Wood, "Intellect in Paint: The Renaissance and the Rise of the Artist," Retrospect Journal, October 20, 2025, <https://retrospectjournal.com/2025/10/20/intellect-in-paint-the-renaissance-and-the-rise-of-the-artist/>.