

Was the Renaissance simply about the secularisation of art?

The Renaissance was more than the secularisation of art. It marked a cultural transformation that blended rising secular ideas with longstanding religious traditions, reshaping how humanity understood itself. The European Renaissance was the moment in which a more secular and multi-dimensional world emerged. During the Renaissance, society became less reliant on religion and increasingly used art to find purpose in life. Humanism started with classical education and was concentrated on human experience. Secularisation in this case meant isolating and accentuating the non-religious themes, without rejecting faith. The Renaissance did not abandon tradition but reinterpreted religious frameworks through humanism, engaged with secular themes, and synthesised modern thought and traditional beliefs to foster a more enlightened society. Art found itself in a new dynamic of patronage from the Church and other civic bodies, as well as a new social composition; while honouring the tradition of religion, Renaissance art was also suggesting a new and changing way of thinking about humanist beliefs.

This synthesis is perhaps most vividly seen in the work of Michelangelo. The visual arts became an area in which the conflicts between religious conventions and Renaissance humanism were resolved - a canvas upon which the anxieties and hopes of the age were projected. This was a duality vividly embodied in Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel Ceiling. Despite the dominance of church commissions, Michelangelo infused these religious scenes with a powerful humanism. He animated biblical narratives with figures of striking individuality and emotion. Using *disegno*, his sculptural approach to painting, he rendered the human body with anatomical precision, presenting it both as a divine creation and as a vessel of personal experience through its three-dimensional aspects. Michelangelo's precise rendering of the human body reflects the Renaissance effort to unite science with divine order. His realism raises a key question: does it challenge religious orthodoxy by emphasising human emotion and experience, or affirm divine perfection through the beauty of the human form? Art historian James Beck¹ describes this as a "twinning of religion and humanistic naturalism," capturing the Renaissance's relationship between sacred ideals and emerging humanist values. Charles de Tolnay's² position on Michelangelo's Neoplatonism framed his commissioned artworks to be of spiritual and social importance. At the same time, William E. Wallace³ discusses the way that Michelangelo's independent voice often disregarded papal expectations. These examples help explain how Renaissance art participated in institutional structures but also critiqued them, demonstrating the fluid boundaries of following orders (obedience) and acting individually (autonomy).



In this sense, the “Sistine Chapel Ceiling” is both a potential model of Renaissance art, being able to reinforce existing religious narratives, while being capable of reframing narratives through a range of historical critical traditions, including humanism. Michelangelo's "Creation of Adam" within the “Sistine Chapel Ceiling”, depicts God giving life to

Adam with hands almost touching, which is undoubtedly a gesture of divine authority (or power) in the image.

¹ James Beck, *Michelangelo: Divine Draftsman and Designer* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2017)

² Charles de Tolnay, *Michelangelo: Sculptor, Painter, Architect, Engineer* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1943)

³ William E. Wallace, *Michelangelo: The Artist, the Man, and His Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010),

However, it also implies human potential, as lifelike can be understood as an act of liberty or autonomy. Adam's fully optimal human form, rendered with exquisite lifelike detail, is drawn from Renaissance humanism, as it privileges the form of the human body as not only dignified but also beautiful. Michelangelo's representation of the "Creation of Adam" in this way blends the traditional religious tradition of 'creation' with a new emphasis on individual experience and subjective embodiment. It illustrates how Michelangelo challenged aspects of sacred history using the methods of humanism. Michelangelo's work is exemplary of a considerable rethinking of holy history. The artwork of Michelangelo is a prime example of a significant reinterpretation of sacred history. The Renaissance humanist worldview, which affirms divine order while simultaneously valuing human dignity and individuality, is reflected in his images, despite their religious roots.

Renaissance individualism can be seen in Leonardo da Vinci's "Last Supper" because he gives each apostle a different expression and personality through his artistic technique. The figures are not the same, as they often were in pre-Renaissance religious paintings; they are more alive. The dynamic forms contribute to the humanity - and ultimately the spirit - of the painting. This approach encourages viewers to connect intimately with the scene, reflecting Renaissance ideas that faith and personal experience were closely linked, as noted by Ficino and Hartt. The humanisation of biblical figures did not secularise faith but made it more accessible and relevant.



Art historian Martin Kemp⁴ has pointed out that Leonardo's thorough anatomical investigations show that he had a 'reverent curiosity'⁴ about his subjects rather than a dispassionate one. At the same time, Hans Belting⁵ has interpreted the scientific studies as stages toward a kind of secular rationalism. Leonardo's embrace of science encompassed larger intellectual transitions created by the invention of the

printing press and humanist scholarship, which enabled broader exchange of ideas and challenged established thought. The Church continued to be a dominant patron. Still, wealth and lucrative commissions, which Michael Baxandall⁶ refers to as 'economic patronage'⁶, had other influences on artists, as they began to produce works to fulfil their private patrons' interests. Even private commissions retained religious subject matter, though often layered with political or personal symbolism; Botticelli's Adoration of the Magi is one such example. While the elites of the Renaissance, like the Medici, were interested in building their humanist education, naming their social custom after classical Greece and Rome, artistic subject matter, particularly for artists of rising reputation, could encompass mythology, through historical and contemporary portraiture, to scenes of domestic and quotidian life. The abundance of symbols surrounding the powerful families signifies how the humanists sought a new narrative of subject in their public and private experience, challenging notions of religious and classical tradition equally, meditating on the question of the sacred. In both cases, they were not denying the holy. However, they were scattering and relocating the religious tradition into a universal circumstance of shared human dignity and sensory immediacy, thereby reconsidering how that sacred experience can be understood. Leonardo humanised biblical figures, showing that Renaissance art deepened faith by merging scientific inquiry with spiritual devotion.

The Renaissance represented not only the evolution and redefinition of art but also a profound transformation of societal ideas. It was a movement for intellectual freedom, urging individuals to reconsider norms beyond

⁴ Martin Kemp, *Leonardo da Vinci: The Marvellous Works of Nature and Man* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006),

⁵ Hans Belting, *The End of the History of Art?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987),

⁶ Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 53

religious constraints. The historian Jacob Burckhardt⁷ argues that the Renaissance was a point at which society adapted into one of individualism and humanism, rather than being solely about art. However, Peter Burke⁸ complicates the view of rupture by showing that many medieval structures endured, making the Renaissance a gradual, overlapping transformation rather than a clean break. This understanding demonstrates how the period emphasised individual liberation and reasoning, which actively resisted the ideas of the Middle Ages. Some historians have claimed that Burckhardt overstated the separation from the Middle Ages and instead see both continuity and innovation with earlier ideas co-occurring alongside humanism. Burke suggests that rather than a clean break from the Middle Ages, there was instead a continuity and transformation side by side. However, the Renaissance is widely recognised for its impact on art. This challenges the notion that the Renaissance had a profound societal impact, raising doubts about its effectiveness if its influence is primarily acknowledged through artistic achievements alone. Peter Burke argues, "What strikes the reader is that this is by no means a restatement of the ultimately rather crude idea"⁸. This directly complicates the idea of the Renaissance as a singular event, showing that the cultural shift was more complicated and more widespread than historians have previously understood. Burke, on the other hand, indicates that Renaissance ideas spread beyond the elite. For most people, though, traditional life and religious authority mainly stayed the same, which limited how revolutionary the time was.

In addition to the power of realism, the Renaissance demonstrated the development of styles and techniques, developing and displaying an unprecedented range of skills. Examples include body anatomy, chiaroscuro, and linear perspective. Enhancing volume and form, chiaroscuro embodied the Renaissance's quest for visual realism. In a two-dimensional piece of art, this contrast gives the impression of depth, volume, and three-dimensionality. Art critic Rudolf Wittkower⁹ argues that chiaroscuro was central to the Renaissance. It transformed how people saw and understood art. This method, which mimics volume and depth using light and shadow, furthered realism in art and embodied the humanist approach of the Renaissance to creating art: the discovery of natural laws, balance, and clarity. These innovations went beyond style, embodying Renaissance humanism's trust in reason and scientific inquiry to grasp the laws shaping both art and the universe. Methods like linear perspective and chiaroscuro made art a thoughtful investigation into the nature of human and divine creation.

Art was the multi-dimensional representation of newly developing human thought, science, political power, and spirituality. The broader redefinition of art that was taking place during the Renaissance would be missed if one were to consider it merely a secularisation of art. In addition to religion, Renaissance artists also worked with anatomy, geometry, philosophy, and literature, all of which were used to reconsider the significance and intent of their creations. For example, the use of linear perspective and anatomical accuracy does not merely mark a technical evolution, but also a philosophical proposition of what humans can understand and express rationally—the core of humanism. Thus, art was considered one expression of a convergence of intellectual and spiritual life. The rich complexity of Renaissance art, which skilfully and intricately combines secular and sacred concepts, is limited if we only consider it as a change from religious to secular themes. It is essential to consider art's function, which is to question, express, and influence the social and intellectual boundaries of its era, rather than its content alone. In this respect, Renaissance art was not merely secularised—it was redefined.

The history of the Church during the Renaissance shows how religious faith and church authority changed along with the rise and growth of secular art. Events like the Avignon Papacy (1309–1377) and the Great Schism (1378–1417) had a substantial adverse effect on the moral authority of the papacy from the end of the Middle Ages to the start of the Renaissance. The “Waning of the Middle Ages” by Johan Huizinga¹⁰ looks at the long-term effects of this decline on culture, which made it harder for ordinary people to connect with the spiritual hierarchy. At the same time, merchants, families, and civic organisations became important patrons of the arts,

⁷ Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (London: Penguin Classics, 1990)

⁸ Peter Burke, *The Renaissance* (London: Macmillan, 1997), page 23

⁹ Rudolf Wittkower, *Art and Architecture in Italy, 1600-1750* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999)

¹⁰ Johan Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (New York: Doubleday, 1954)

which supported both religious and non-religious artistic production. In cities like Florence, people who loved art paid for works that were both religious and expressions of civic pride.

The Protestant Reformation, which started in 1517 with Martin Luther's Ninety-Five Theses, questioned the Church's power and led to iconoclasm in Northern Europe, as Eamon Duffy¹¹ points out. This movement encouraged simpler religious art and increased secular art themes. However, the Catholic Counter-Reformation, articulated through the Council of Trent (1545-1563), reinforced the use of religious imagery to inspire faith, commissioning grand, emotive works by artists such as Caravaggio and Bernini, as explained by Michael Baxandall and others. The printing press, invented around 1440 by Johannes Gutenberg, also transformed the dissemination of ideas. By enabling the mass production of books and pamphlets, it spread Renaissance humanist thought and new scientific discoveries widely, promoting a culture of learning and inquiry that encouraged secular knowledge alongside religious study.

In conclusion, Renaissance art is not simply sacred or secular. It blends both traditions, reflecting a society undergoing deep transformation. It both retained and reinterpreted religious traditions while embracing humanism and secular themes. Through innovations in technique and a dynamic patronage system, Renaissance art reshaped the role of art in society - from mere religious decoration to a powerful vehicle for human expression, inquiry, and cultural identity. The Renaissance was not the end of faith but a profound transformation in how humanity viewed itself and the divine.

¹¹ Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, 1400–1580* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992)