

Fifteenth-Century Art in Italy and Flanders: a Comparison

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The fifteenth century saw the movement of the world of art from the stylized vision of medieval times, particularly in the Gothic era, to a naturalistic portrayal of the world. This realism derived from a revival of the aesthetic of the Classical era, as epitomized by Greco-Roman art of approximately 500 BC. Of course, this dramatic change in style did not happen all at once, but rather evolved over nearly a century.

This Classical aesthetic was rediscovered in southern Europe, particularly Italy, late in the fourteenth century. It would be several decades before this influence would migrate northward into Flanders and affect the art of northern Europe. In both areas, however, painting and sculpture visibly showed this influence long before architecture. This, of course, is simply because painting and sculpture have an immediacy about their creation that architecture lacks. While a painting or sculpture might take months from inception to completion, a major architectural work such as a cathedral commonly would take decades to design and build. Thus, it was not unusual to see Renaissance-style paintings or sculptures adorning the still very Gothic cathedrals of the early fifteenth century. Furthermore, early fifteenth-century paintings from both locations often show Classically influenced figures in a Gothically-influenced setting, as seen in Gentile's *The Procession and Adoration of the Magi* (Italian) as well as Campin's *Mérode Altarpiece* (Flemish).

In comparing the early Renaissance style in Italy and Flanders, the focus must be primarily on painting, as the Flemish Renaissance artists were almost exclusively known for painting rather than sculpture or architecture. In comparing the paintings of the two areas, the similarities tend to outweigh the differences, especially when this painting style is contrasted with the Byzantine and medieval images of only a century earlier. In both

areas, artists were demonstrating a clear preference for lifelike, representational figures set in a clearly three-dimensional space, in contrast to the stylized figures and flat spaces of medieval art. However, differences in technique as well as style are apparent with even cursory examination.

The first difference is in the painting medium itself. The use of oil paints became popular a full century earlier in northern Europe than in the Mediterranean, which continued to prefer fresco and tempera through the fifteenth century. Looking at the two climates, this is not surprising, since the damp, cool northern climate would likely cause an undesirably rapid deterioration of fresco-based artwork. Additionally, oil allows for better blending and mixing of colors than tempera paints, and for use of canvas instead of wood as a support, minimizing the influence of warping.

Oil paints allowed Flemish artists to indulge the regional preference for intricate, tiny detail in their paintings. The fresco method preferred in the south lent itself to broad brushstrokes and general impressions due to the speed necessary for completion of sections of the work. In this instance, technique does influence style (though surely the circle is completed by the preference in style influencing the choice of technique). One of the best examples of this use of fine detail in Flemish art is in Jan van Eyck's *Ghent Altarpiece*, with its glowing colors and especially the tiny brushstrokes rendering the most minute details in the images.

The use of linear perspective, developed by Brunelleschi in the early 1400s, forms another important difference in the painting of Italy as opposed to Flanders in this era. Much fifteenth century Italian painting shows a strong use of linear perspective, with orthogonals converging on a single vanishing point, which often served as a focus for the

composition. Masaccio's *The Holy Trinity* is one of the earliest examples of an Italian painting clearly showing the use of linear perspective. Contrast this work with Campin's *Mérode Altarpiece*. Campin uses linear perspective, but see what happens. Each of the three panels is seen from a different viewpoint; each panel has its own vanishing point rather than all three panels using a single perspective. Even within a single panel, however, the use of perspective is not fully accurate. In the center panel, the ceiling lines and rafters converge towards a common point, and the floor and the lines in the doorway and surrounding area converge towards a separate point. But then the viewer is confused and disoriented by the distorted images of the tabletop and the copper basin in the wall niche, which don't fit with anything else in the scene from the point of view of perspective.

Italian art of this period depicts a highly idealized view of the world, with little if any evidence of the trappings of everyday life. Compositionally, Italian art of this era is highly symmetrical, focusing on the triangle or pyramid as the primary shape around which an image is constructed. Placement of figures within a scene is carefully considered. Many Italian paintings show figures set against a relatively open landscape, employing atmospheric perspective to obscure distant details. Other Italian paintings set figures in a spare architectural setting with no evidence of mundane objects. Masaccio's *Brancacci Chapel* fresco cycle illustrates both types of backgrounds in its scenes.

Flemish paintings of this era, though, are less idealized and actually more realistic, depicting figures in everyday settings. These settings are often crowded, even cluttered, rather than open and spare, with placement of figures and objects secondary to making sure all the imagery desired is present. This reflects the northern view of the

sacred as a part of everyday secular life rather than as something set apart. Flemish pieces such as van Eyck's *The Arnolfini Wedding Portrait* and two of the three panels of Campin's *Mérode Altarpiece* are set indoors, in everyday rooms. In the *Altarpiece*, the view we see through the window of Joseph's workshop is as sharp and clear, though obviously at a distance, as the rest of the image. Additionally, both Flemish images show ordinary household objects as part of the setting, such as Joseph's tools in the *Altarpiece* and the shoes on the floor in the *Wedding Portrait*.

Even the difference in the fabrics depicted in Flemish versus Italian paintings is telling. The fabric in Flemish painting shows sharp-edged, even stiff lines in its folds, still occasionally obscuring body line as in medieval times. Italian painting shows softer, more flowing, drapery molding closely to the body as a rule. This is conceivably not only a difference in painting style, but also a reflection of the actual fabrics worn by individuals in the two areas. Heavy satins, brocades, and woolens, all of which drape stiffly, were more popular in cold, damp northern Europe. Lighter, even gauzy, silks and linens, with their easy flowing drape, better suit the warm, dry climate of the Mediterranean.

The Flemish view of the sacred as a natural part of everyday life leads to a distinct difference in symbology in Flemish art as opposed to Italian art during this era. Campin, van Eyck, and their Flemish contemporaries used everyday objects such as containers and household furnishings to provide a subtle Christian symbolism in their paintings. On the other hand, in certain cases Flemish art is distinguished by its lack of symbolism, specifically the absence of visible haloes around the heads of images of sacred figures such as the Christ, the Virgin Mary, saints, and angels. The use of glowing golden haloes

as a visible symbol to mark sacred figures was highly popular in medieval art and had persisted well into the early Italian Renaissance, as evidenced in the two *Annunciation* paintings by Fra Angelico around 1440 and Piero della Francesca around 1450. No such icons are seen in the great Flemish altarpieces of this era.

In short, Renaissance art in Italy is about art itself, bringing Classical ideals forward into a technically perfect and compositionally pure setting. Renaissance art in northern Europe is about expression, using art to convey a message, with composition and technique subordinated to the overall goal when necessary.