

Avery Stanley

December 4, 2024

Renaissance Art

Professor Cecilia Martelli

The Natural Rendering of the Human Figure in Renaissance Art

The Renaissance is characterized by a focus on realism and the study of the human form. Many influential artists during this period were inspired by the revival of classical antiquity, which led them in their attempt to render the human figure with a new sense of realism and accuracy. Likewise, this pursuit for a more natural rendering of the human figure was fueled by a growing focus on perspective and physical anatomy. Through an analysis of the following artworks, *Crucifixion* by Cimabue, *Crucifixion* by Giotto, *Holy Trinity* by Masaccio, *David* by Donatello, *David* by Michelangelo, and the Tombs of Giuliano, Duke of Nemour, and Lorenzo, Duke of Urbino, in the New Sacristy by Michelangelo, it is evident that there is an evolution of style in the rendering of the human figure during the Renaissance. This evolution of style and technique resulted in a more realistic depiction of the human form, as well as revealed new aspects of human emotion that were not present in art prior to the Renaissance.

The first work that began to emphasize the importance of anatomical depictions is the *Crucifixion* by Cimabue. Cimabue was a Florentine painter and mosaicist who lived from 1240 to 1302. Cimabue is an artist of many influential artworks, such as the *Crucifixion*, the *Flagellation of Christ*, and the *Madonna and Child*.¹ Cimabue is well known for being the master of Giotto, who is a key figure in the Renaissance and the rendering of the human figure. Cimabue is important as an artist because he represents the beginning of a shift between the

¹ Kojen, Naomi. "Cimabue Artist Overview and Analysis." The Art Story, Antony Todd, 1 Nov. 2021, www.theartstory.org/artist/cimabue/.

Gothic and Renaissance style of painting. The *Crucifixion* by Cimabue was made in 1290, and it was created using tempera on panel. The painting resides in the Santa Croce Church and was commissioned by the monks of the Franciscan order. The artwork was highly damaged in the flood of 1966 because it was completed on wood, which expanded in the flood water. The *Crucifixion* was never completely restored, but still remains in Santa Croce. The artwork depicts Jesus Christ hanging on the cross with the Virgin Mary pictured on the left and John the Evangelist pictured on the right. Jesus's body is hung with his arms stretched horizontally outwards and his torso leaning to one side.² This positioning is an unnatural rendering of the human figure because Jesus's arms do not seem as though they are hanging properly. His body looks elegantly posed to the side, which is not an accurate representation of how a human figure would appear hanging on a cross. This is important to understanding the evolution of the rendering of the human figure because, although Cimabue's rendering of Christ is unnatural, it foreshadows the work of his pupil, Giotto, whose *Crucifixion* further aids in representing a more natural rendering of the human figure.

Giotto is a highly important Italian painter who produced many Renaissance artworks during the 14th century. Giotto was alive from 1267 to 1337, in which time he aided in creating a more naturalistic rendering of the human figure.³ Being a pupil of Cimabue, he contributed to the transition out of Gothic style and into the Renaissance style, which is a revival of classical antiquity. Giotto's artworks are essential to understanding how the rendering of the human figure evolved from his master, Cimabue, to influential artists that later followed him, such as Masaccio. Giotto's *Crucifixion* was made in 1305 and was created with the technique tempera on

² Hartt, Frederick. *History of Italian Renaissance Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture* (6th ed., 2007). "Duecento Art in Tuscany and Rome"; pp. 48-52.

³ Murray, Peter J. "Roman Period of Giotto." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., 7 June 2024, www.britannica.com/biography/Giotto-di-Bondone/Roman-period.

panel. The artwork is in the Santa Maria Novella Church and was commissioned by the Dominican order of monks. The *Crucifixion* depicts Jesus Christ in the center of the image with the Virgin Mary on the left and John the Baptist on the right. It also depicts Jesus's crucifixion being planted on the mountain, Golgotha, on the tomb of Adam's grave.⁴ The blood of Jesus is dripping onto Adam's skull, which represents Jesus's salvation of man from the creation of sin. Furthermore, in Giotto's depiction of the *Crucifixion*, Jesus's body hangs naturally from the cross. Christ's arms are shifted upwards, rather than horizontally, and his upper body seems to lean forward while his knees are bent.⁵ Similarly, Jesus's ribs and arm muscles are depicted with far more detail due to Giotto's use of shadowing and light. The contrast between light and dark, also known as the "chiaroscuro" effect, is a technique created by Giotto, which revolutionized the way human figures are portrayed in art. Giotto's creation and use of the chiaroscuro effect is an important advancement in the natural rendering of the human body. Similarly to Giotto, Masaccio is also a great innovator in early Renaissance painting of the rendering of the human figure.

Masaccio is a Florentine artist who, despite his short life from 1401 to 1428, created many influential works in the Renaissance style. He worked in collaboration with the artist Massolino on artworks, such as *Sant'Anna Metterza* and a number of the frescoes in the Brancacci Chapel. Two of these frescoes which demonstrate Masaccio's mastery are *Expulsion from the Garden of Eve* and *Tribute Money*, which both showcase Masaccio's use of the chiaroscuro technique. One of Masaccio's works which best shows his innovation in the rendering of the human figure is the *Holy Trinity*. This artwork is a fresco that was completed in

⁴ Hartt, Frederick. *History of Italian Renaissance Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture* (6th ed., 2007). "Florentine Art of the Early Trecento." pp. 73-74

⁵ Hartt, Frederick. *History of Italian Renaissance Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture* (6th ed., 2007). "Florentine Art of the Early Trecento." pp. 73-74

1427. The painting's location is in the Santa Maria Novella church, however, the positioning within the church has been changed due to the transformation of the altar.⁶ The depiction of the crucifixion includes the holy trinity, which shows God the father, Jesus the son, and the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove. Closest to Christ are the Virgin Mary on the left and John the Baptist on the right. The painting was commissioned by an unknown Florentine family who are thought to be either from the Berti or Lenzi family, and they are portrayed within the fresco as the two older figures in robes kneeling below the crucifixion of Jesus.⁷ Underneath them in the painting is a tomb with a skeleton surrounded by columns. The iconography of the tomb alludes to the tomb of Adam where Christ was believed to be crucified above, which represents his death for the salvation of man.⁸ A crucial aspect of the painting is the depiction of the classical Roman architecture with corinthian and ionic capitals, as well as perfect symmetry, in the background of the scene.⁹ This architecture mirrors the work of Brunelleschi, a highly important Renaissance architect, who Masaccio either replicated or received the layout from. This depiction of architecture creates depth on a flat surface. Likewise, Masaccio creates a one-point linear perspective, which means that diagonal lines throughout the painting are all directioned to a central point. Furthermore, one of the most important aspects of the fresco is Masaccio's use of the chiaroscuro effect to render the natural human form. Masaccio uses light and dark with the fresco to create shading around Jesus's body, specifically his arms and torso. There is also shadowing on Jesus's hands to represent the realism of the nails from his crucifixion. Likewise, Masaccio's focus on realism reveals the emotion of his subjects. The other figures in the painting,

⁶ Coolidge, John. "Further Observations on Masaccio's Trinity", in *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 48, No. 3/4 (Sep. - Dec., 1966), pp. 382-384.

⁷ Comanducci, Rita Maria. "L'altare Nostro de la Trinità: Masaccio's Trinity and the Berti Family", in *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 145, No. 1198 (Jan., 2003), pp. 14-21.

⁸ Hartt, Frederick. *History of Italian Renaissance Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture* (6th ed., 2007). "Gothic and Renaissance in Florentine Painting," pp. 217-218.

⁹ Hartt, Frederick. *History of Italian Renaissance Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture* (6th ed., 2007). "Gothic and Renaissance in Florentine Painting," pp. 217-218.

the Virgin Mary, John the Baptist, and the members of the unknown Florentine family, look elderly and have quite severe faces. Masaccio makes great steps within the *Holy Trinity* of creating a natural rendering of the human figure, which also depicts human emotion and suffering. Moreover, the work of Donatello demonstrates an evolution of the natural rendering of the human figure during the Renaissance period.

Donatello is an important Italian sculptor who lived from 1386 to 1466.¹⁰ Like Masaccio, Donatello aided in reviving the classical style of antiquity to create a more natural rendering of the human figure. Donatello created many works that demonstrate this, such as *St. Marc* and *St. George* in Orsanmichele, as well as *Mary Magdalene* in the Opera del Duomo. Donatello was also friends and colleagues with Brunelleschi, whom he tarnished his relationship with after working on the Old Sacristy in San Lorenzo Church against Brunelleschi's wishes. Donatello was also under the patronage of the Medici family who played an instrumental role in many of his artworks. One of Donatello's most important works, which demonstrates his natural rendering of the human figure, is *David*. The *David*, a freestanding bronze sculpture, was constructed in 1440. It was commissioned by Cosimo de' Medici and resided in the courtyard of the Medici Palace, but is now located in the Bargello Museum. The sculpture depicts *David*, a representative of the Israelites, after he has just beheaded Goliath. The narrative behind the sculpture is that David, who convinced King Saul to let him fight Goliath, could not fit into the armor of a man, so he is in the nude with only boots and a hat.¹¹ He fought with only a slingshot and five pebbles, but now holds Goliath's sword after decapitating him with it. *David*, commissioned for the Medici family, was used as a political symbol.¹² The statue was placed in

¹⁰ Janson, H.W. "Donatello." Encyclopædia Britannica, Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., 10 Oct. 2024, www.britannica.com/biography/Donatello.

¹¹ Hartt, Frederick. *History of Italian Renaissance Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture* (6th ed., 2007) "Gothic and Renaissance in Florentine Painting," pp. 257-259.

¹² McHam, S. Blake. 'Donatello's bronze David and Judith as Metaphors of Medici Rule in Florence', in *Art Bulletin*, vol. 83, 2001, pp. 32-47.

the courtyard of the Medici Palace where citizens could see it, which signified the Medici as the protectors and defenders of Florence. Donatello's depiction of *David* is important because he is being portrayed as a young boy rather than a man, which is faithful to the Bible's description. *David* stands in the contrapposto positioning with his left leg bent and one hand on his hip.¹³ He has the correct anatomical rendering of a young boy, which shows Donatello's mastery of realism and naturalism. *David* is also the first rendering of a freestanding nude sculpture, which is a revival of classical art. These aspects of the sculpture represent how Donatello aided in contributing to the natural rendering of the human figure. Likewise, Donatello's rendering of *David* can be contrasted to that of Michelangelo's, whose depiction is also important for the progression of naturalism in rendering the human figure.

Michelangelo is an incredible Renaissance artist who is foremost acknowledged for his sculptural abilities. He was also a painter and architect, and he created many influential works, such as *Bacchus* in the Bargello Museum, the Tomb of Pope Julius II, the New Sacristy in the San Lorenzo church, and many frescoes in the Sistine Chapel. Michelangelo also studied the work of many of the artists who furthered the natural rendering of the human figure, such as Giotto, Masaccio, and Donatello.¹⁴ One of Michelangelo's most famous works of art is his rendering of *David*. Michelangelo's *David* is a marble sculpture, which was constructed from 1501-1504. *David* was originally supposed to be placed on top of Florence's Cathedral, however, the sculpture would have looked too small, so instead it was placed in front of Palazzo Vecchio in Piazza Signoria.¹⁵ Now, *David* has been in the Accademia Gallery since 1873. The sculpture was commissioned by the Republic of Florence, which reflects the historical background of

¹³ Hartt, Frederick. *History of Italian Renaissance Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture* (6th ed., 2007) "Gothic and Renaissance in Florentine Painting," pp. 257-259.

¹⁴ Sethi, Zaid S. "Michelangelo Artist Overview and Analysis." *The Art Story*, Kimberly Nichols, Antony Todd, 19 June 2018, www.theartstory.org/artist/michelangelo/.

¹⁵ Hartt, Frederick, *History of Italian Renaissance Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture* (6th ed., 2007) "The High Renaissance in Florence," pp. 476-478.

Florence. This historical context begins with Lorenzo the Magnificent, a strong Florentine leader, who was a patron of Michelangelo. Lorenzo the Magnificent died in 1492, leaving his son, Piero the Unlucky, as the de-facto ruler of Florence. The Medici family were soon exiled because of his inadequacy, and Michelangelo left Florence for Rome from 1496-1501. Florence was a Republic from 1494-1515, and the Florentine Republic called Michelangelo back from Rome in 1501 to complete the *David*. The sculpture was placed in front of Palazzo Vecchio as a symbol of the Florentine Republic against the Medici family. This history explains how Michelangelo worked for both the Medici and the Republic at different points in time. The positioning of *David* is crucial to Michelangelo's rendering because the sculpture is posed in the contrapposto positioning. There is a piece of tree behind one of David's legs, which is also being used to support his weight. Likewise, he has a rock in one hand and a slingshot in the other, which is being held behind his back. Michelangelo's rendering is different from Donatello's in several ways. Firstly, Michelangelo's *David* looks far more muscular and man-like.¹⁶ Michelangelo wanted to portray the strength of the male body, which is why he depicted *David* as a man, rather than the biblically-accurate description of him as a boy. Michelangelo's depiction also shows *David* completely naked, rather than with boots or a helmet. Likewise, Donatello's *David* showed him after he had beheaded Goliath, whereas Michelangelo showed him before the battle.¹⁷ Because of this, *David* appears tense and nervous. His face appears apprehensive because his eyes are also looking into the distance, and his face has wrinkled. This look of worry is similar to Donatello's *St. George* because both figures were nervous before an important fight. This portrayal of emotion is crucial in understanding Michelangelo's natural rendering of the

¹⁶ Hartt, Frederick, *History of Italian Renaissance Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture* (6th ed., 2007)"The High Renaissance in Florence," pp. 476-478.

¹⁷ Hartt, Frederick, *History of Italian Renaissance Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture* (6th ed., 2007)"The High Renaissance in Florence," pp. 476-478.

human figure. *David's* emotion aids the narrative of his story, as well as depicts him as a realistic human who is experiencing suffering and worry. Likewise, his physical positioning shows a natural stance, as well as an accurate depiction of a muscular, male body. *David's* torso and chest are large and defined, and he has a vein that travels up from his arm to his neck. These attributes show the evolution that Michelangelo created in the natural rendering of the human body. Furthermore, Michelangelo's work on the New Sacristy of the San Lorenzo Church also encompasses important innovations he made on the rendering of the human figure.

Two important monuments in the New Sacristy of the San Lorenzo Church by Michelangelo are the Tomb of Giuliano, Duke of Nemour, and the Tomb of Lorenzo, Duke of Urbino. These tombs are made of marble as well as adorned with marble sculptures, and they were completed between 1519-1534. The entirety of the New Sacristy was commissioned by Pope Clement VII. The historical context of the New Sacristy surrounds the Medici family. Giovanni Medici, the son of Lorenzo the Magnificent, became Pope Leo, causing Lorenzo the Magnificent to become the de-facto ruler of Florence in 1516. Then, in 1523, Julio Medici, the cousin of Pope Leo, became Pope Clement VII. Michelangelo originally went into hiding in the New Sacristy because he was going to be persecuted by the Medici for conspiring with the Republic. He was then pardoned by Pope Clement VII and commissioned for the New Sacristy. Michelangelo, however, ultimately left Florence in 1534, leaving the New Sacristy unfinished. Giuliano, the Duke of Neymour, is the third son of Lorenzo the Magnificent. His marble figure is depicted as a captain of the Roman Church. Giuliano is sitting, however, the positioning of his body looks as though he could spring into action at any time. Giuliano's legs are in a natural positioning with one leg forward while the other is bent, showing a contrapposto pose even while sitting. He is also wearing armor, however you can still see his sculpted torso, which again shows

Michelangelo's focus on a naturalistic rendering of the human form. His head is turned towards a sculpture of the Virgin Mary, which is located on the other side of the New Sacristy, representing looking towards salvation and purity. The two marble sculptures that are below Giuliano are Night and Day.¹⁸ Night is a smooth, female figure made of marble, who symbolizes motherhood because she is meant to be dreaming of her children. She has marble detailing around her, which depicts a mask, an owl, and poppy. These symbols are supposed to represent different aspects of night: mask as deception of night, owl as a night bird, and poppy due to it causing dreaming. Though Night is a female figure, she does not appear to be feminine. She has the face of a woman, however, she has the body of a male figure with a chiseled torso, chest, and strong arms. This is likely because Michelangelo preferred to show the male form due to its strength and toned form. Similarly, women were also not allowed to pose naked during this time. Night is in a twisted contrapposto position because her leg and elbow are twisted in to meet one another. Contrastingly to Night, Day is a masculine figure who has a rough texture and appears unfinished. Day also does not have the same iconography as Night because there are no figures or symbols around him. Day's body is contorted because his legs are positioned away from the chapel, and he is turning his torso to attempt to show his face to the viewer. Day is extremely muscular and large, and is one of Michelangelo's most vivid depictions of a strong male. Day is important to Michelangelo's advancement in the natural rendering of the human body because he is extremely muscular and detailed.

The Tomb of Lorenzo, Duke of Urbino, is placed opposite the Tomb of Giuliano. Unlike Giuliano, the marble sculpture of Lorenzo is more stagnant and less action-like. Lorenzo was nick-named "The Thinker," which is why he has a pensive face, and his hand is brought to his

¹⁸ Hartt, Frederick. *History of Italian Renaissance Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture* (6th ed., 2007) "High Renaissance and Mannerism," pp. 553-556.

chin as though he is pondering something. Lorenzo's face, like Giuliano's, is looking towards the Virgin Mary across the New Sacristy, which shows the figure looking towards purity. His body is also in a sitting, contrapposto position as one of his legs is bent. Furthermore, the marble figures below Lorenzo are Dawn and Dusk. Dawn is the female figure, and she is shown with her eyes closed as though she is falling asleep. Dawn is the parallel of Night because Night is happy, dreaming of her children, while Dawn has a sorrowful look because she has no children.¹⁹ The sorrow on Dawn's face again demonstrates Michelangelo's ability to portray the emotion of his subjects. Dawn is also depicted in a more feminine manner than Night. This may be attributed to the fact that Michelangelo left the New Sacristy unfinished in 1534, leaving one of his followers to complete the work. Next to Dawn is Dusk, who is a masculine figure. Dusk contrasts the male figure opposite of him, Day. Compared to Day, Dusk is less masculine looking and appears smaller. Dusk is in the contrapposto positioning because his body is twisted towards the viewer, and he is looking downwards. The figures on these tombs are representative of Michelangelo's ability to portray detailed, masculine figures which show his natural rendering of human bodies.

The innovation of the Renaissance era which furthered the natural rendering of the human figure was developed by artists such as Cimabue, Giotto, Masaccio, Donatello, and Michelangelo. These artists were inspired by a revival of classical art, which led them to depict human figures with unprecedented realism. The evolution of the rendering of the human figure can also be attributed to different techniques, such as the chiaroscuro effect, which created new elements of naturalness and accuracy within Renaissance artworks. In conclusion, the Renaissance showcased an advancement in the physical forms of figures, as well as the emotion of subjects that were being portrayed.

¹⁹ Hartt, Frederick. *History of Italian Renaissance Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture* (6th ed., 2007) "High Renaissance and Mannerism," pp. 553-556.

Works Cited

- Coolidge, John. "Further Observations on Masaccio's Trinity", in *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 48, No. 3/4 (Sep. - Dec., 1966), pp. 382-384.
- Comanducci, Rita Maria. "L'altare Nostro de la Trinità': Masaccio's Trinity and the Berti Family", in *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 145, No. 1198 (Jan., 2003), pp. 14-21.
- Hartt, Frederick. *History of Italian Renaissance Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture* (6th ed., 2007). "Duecento Art in Tuscany and Rome," pp. 48-52
- Hartt, Frederick. *History of Italian Renaissance Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture* (6th ed., 2007). "Florentine Art of the Early Trecento." pp. 73-74
- Hartt, Frederick. *History of Italian Renaissance Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture* (6th ed., 2007). "Gothic and Renaissance in Florentine Painting," pp. 217-218.
- Hartt, Frederick. *History of Italian Renaissance Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture* (6th ed., 2007) "Gothic and Renaissance in Florentine Painting," pp. 257-259.
- Hartt, Frederick, *History of Italian Renaissance Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture* (6th ed., 2007)"The High Renaissance in Florence," pp. 476-478.
- Hartt, Frederick. *History of Italian Renaissance Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture* (6th ed., 2007) "High Renaissance and Mannerism," pp. 553-556.
- Janson, H.W. "Donatello." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., 10 Oct. 2024, www.britannica.com/biography/Donatello.
- Kojen, Naomi. "Cimabue Artist Overview and Analysis." *The Art Story*, Antony Todd, 1 Nov. 2021, www.theartstory.org/artist/cimabue/.
- McHam, S. Blake. 'Donatello's bronze David and Judith as Metaphors of Medici Rule in Florence', in *Art Bulletin*, vol. 83, 2001, pp. 32-47.

Murray, Peter J. "Roman Period of Giotto." Encyclopædia Britannica, Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., 7 June 2024, www.britannica.com/biography/Giotto-di-Bondone/Roman-period.

Sethi, Zaid S. "Michelangelo Artist Overview and Analysis." The Art Story, Kimberly Nichols, Antony Todd, 19 June 2018, www.theartstory.org/artist/michelangelo/.