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The Renaissance Wave

Where the spirit does not work with the hand, there is no art. ~ Leonardo da Vinci

Art *can* change the world, however in ancient times, being an “artist” was no great accomplishment and was thought to be, simply, another job. An artist’s ability to look through their visionary eyes and capture the world in new ways, or to present ideas that pushed people up against what they had always believed was not valued. Art was cloistered into religious material, stifled by rules, protocol and demands, and there was very little joy in the actual *art* of being an artist. It was merely a *job* and something that *had to* be done, a way of recording history, or a way to get across the correct message in the correct way for the correct church.

During the 14th through the 17th centuries – the Renaissance period – the world began to change as minds expanded through education. Organized universities offered education about law, philosophy, advanced mathematics, and medicine. As education swept through society, uplifting the minds, and opening the eyes to new things, art began to change, as well. Artisans began changing how art was done, what topics would be covered, and for whom they created art.

In this paper, I will follow the wave of the Renaissance through Italy from the building of the momentum in the 1300's, to the rolling during the 1400's, to the cresting of the mid-1500's. I will discuss the political, societal, and religious atmosphere of the periods and choose artists that embody the wave in each of its stages. These eras last about one hundred years each and span from mid-century of one century to mid-century of the next.

Building the Momentum

One of the most pivotal changes during the Renaissance was the explosive growth of domineering religion and, conversely, the expansion of sciences and logical reasoning. These two, seemingly polar opposite ways of thinking, resulted in two veins of thinking.

On one hand, there was the scientific and logical vein. Rather than "blaming" everything on unseen powers, deities, and mythological forces, people began applying the scientific method to understand it. If they could not logically test out and find scientific proof of whatever they questioned, it became a cause for concern and was deemed "witchcraft." On the other hand, there was the controlling religious vein that wanted nothing to do with anything *other* than God. They set protocols and rules for everyone to live by and those who seemed to be in opposition of that were deemed pagans or witches.

Anything called "witchcraft" or "magic" was damned twofold: through science and through religion. In pursuit of "truth," 200,000 to 500,000 "witches" were executed in Europe during the early decades of the 1300's and on through 1650. Nearly 85% of those executed were women. (Ben-Yehuda, 1980)

Historians whose main focus is the political atmosphere of 14th century Italy have stated that, at that time, there was no central main government for the entire country. Italy

was a city-state at this time and each region was governed separately. People were loyal to their region only. In the paper entitled *Italy and the Italians in the Political Geography of the Byzantines (14th Century)*, Angeliki E. Laiou quotes George Pachymeres:

“...[Pachymeres is seeing] neither Europe nor Italy as a monolithic unit, even in geographic terms. Instead, he sees the division of the peninsula into various political entities: he refers specifically to the maritime republics of Venice, Genoa, and Pisa, to the marquisate of Montferrat, to the “kingdom of Apulia,” i.e., the Angevin kingdom of Naples, and to Sicily. He knows not only that there are different political entities, but also that there are political antagonisms between them, such as that between Venice and Genoa.” (Laiou, 1995)

Through this scholar’s observations, we are able to see that the political atmosphere of 14th Century Italy was anything *but* cohesive. With the political unrest, witch-hunt madness, and religious domination, the art of this era is decidedly focused on getting across the message that Christianity and religious leaders, and government and heads of government are all good, light, and correct, while everything else is evil, dark, and wrong.

Additionally, by the mid 1300’s, when the Renaissance period began in Italy, society was careening into the depths of desperation after some major natural and societal catastrophes. (Stokstad & Cothren, 2011) In 1333, a flood devastated Florence and, in the 1340’s, Italy experienced a series of bank failures. Famine hit in 1346-1347 and, on the heels of that, the bubonic plague (aka “The Black Death”) swept from Asia to Europe, by land and sea, wiping out, by some estimations, 50% of the world’s population.

According to Millard Meiss, as quoted by Louise Marshall in her article, *Manipulating the Sacred: Image and Plague in Renaissance Italy*, following The Black Death, art in

Florence and Siena underwent drastic changes in both style and theme. Marshall stated that Meiss observed that artists had turned away from the “intimate and humane presentation of the holy figures to a more hierarchical and formalized mode that deliberately distanced the beholder from the object of his or her devotion.” (Marshall, 1994)

Although the Renaissance is slated as beginning mid-14th century, I believe that the piece of work that best embodies the overall political, emotional, financial, societal, and religious climate of 14th century Italy would be Ambrogio Lorenzetti’s mural entitled *The Effects of Good Government in the City and in the Country* [Figures 1-4] which can be found at Sala del Nove, Palazzo Pubblico, Siena, Italy. This fresco, totaling about 46 feet in length, tells the allegory of what happens when “good” government reigns supreme. The people are prosperous and active, the city thrives, and the church seems to approve of this government seat. Outside their province, though, it can be seen that the countryside is laid to waste and darkness. The goodness of the government does not reach into the countryside, indicating that “bad” government lies outside their city walls.

Figure 1 The whole mural:



Figure 2 Detail of the panels. The government:



Figure 3 Detail of the panels. In the city:



Figure 4 Detail of the panels. In the countryside:



This beautiful work of art encapsulates the atmosphere of its time. Its blatant theme of “good government” providing the best for everyone is beautifully rendered. Lorenzetti captures the essence of what the rulers wanted their people to know: that, without government, there is poverty, disorder, disease, and famine. Using fresco, the medium of choice at that time, Lorenzetti has created a delicate document of a snapshot of history. And, perhaps, without any knowledge, foreshadowed the surge of people that would move into the cities from the outlying countryside in the 15th century.

The Rolling of the Renaissance Wave

Following the devastation of the Black Death in Italy, the Renaissance wave officially began rolling through the country. According to dictionary.com, the origins of the word “renaissance” is Middle French and it means “rebirth,” (dictionary.com, 2013). This is a perfect match for the climate of 15th century Italy.

By the mid-1400’s, the cultural centers were north of Rome in Florence, Milan, and Venice, as well as the smaller principalities of Mantua, Ferrara, and Urbino. The power and the influence in the country was in the hand of specific, wealthy families. In Florence, it was the Medici and in Ferrara, it was the Estes. In Urbino, it was the Montefeltro; in Mantua, it was the Gonzaga; and the Visconti and Sforza families ran Milan. (Stokstad & Cothren, 2011)

At this time, as unintentionally foretold by Lorenzetti, people started swarming into the cities from the countryside, resulting in wealth and independence. The importance of commerce was escalating and money became the trademark of status. People now could *earn* their standing in society, rather than being born into it. Order was maintained in the ever-increasingly crowded cities by mercenary armies who were led by innovative military

commanders called *condottieri*. (Stokstad & Cothren, 2011) These *condottieri* were loyal only to those who paid them well. That could have been the government of the city-state, a lord, or the Pope himself. Art was an important public activity and was rife with political, and often times obvious, insinuations. A Florentine merchant by the name of Giovanni Rucellai has been quoted as stating that he supported the arts because “they serve the glory of God, the honour of the city, and the commemoration of myself.” (Baxandall, 1988)

Life in all forms and manners was a cornucopia of delight. Art returned to focusing on classical Greek idealism and beauty. Matters that had once been private, such as marriage and the marriage bed, became widely discussed and extolled. Weddings were performed with nuptial orations by humanists that promoted the idea of healthy unions.

“... they discuss the value of marriage, praise wifely virtues, and offer family genealogies... They also address topics such as the joys and uses of sex... These orators often present marriage in ways that are perhaps not surprising, given what we know about the importance of dowries and political alliances in fifteenth-century Italy. But they also sometimes promote ideals and, in particular, attributes in brides that were for the most part not present in earlier conceptions of marriage. They are unabashed in praising utilitarian factors in marriage decisions, such as wealth and political alliance; but they also celebrate companionship and the joys of sexual pleasure. Drawing upon classical literature, personal experience, and contemporary history, humanist orators constructed a coherent set of courtly ideals in which marriage was at the center.”

(D'Elia, 2002)

Artistically, the fifteenth-century Italian artisans were trailblazers in techniques and mediums. During this century, artists introduced *trompe-l'oeil* (“fool-the-eye”), perspective

– linear, atmospheric, one-point, multiple-point – and also focused on the intricate details of human anatomy and proportion relating to the sum of the parts of the individual figures, as well as the individual figures in relation to the whole composition. They were hired to create spectacular buildings and interiors for sophisticated, wealthy clients. Working with intarsia (wood inlay) decoration, engravings, bronze, gold, tempera, and fresco as some of their chosen mediums, these artisans returned to antiquity and created art for those who had the money and power. This resulted in art that was created for the church and the ruling families. Often times, the artisan paid homage to the client by placing the patron, or a symbol of them, in the work itself.

One of my favorite pieces produced during this time is the masterful work (the creator of which is unidentified, but is often attributed to Baccio Pontelli (Cheles, 1982) or Giuliano da Maiano (Stokstad & Cothren, 2011)) found in the *Studiolo of Federico da Montefeltro* in the Ducal Palace of Urbino. [Figures 5-7] Created in 1476, this study is where the owner stored his extraordinary collection of important books and art, and where private conversations would have been held, is an exemplary display of linear perspective, classical antiquity perfection, and trompe-l'oeil and was constructed entirely out of wood inlaid on a flat surface.

Many things portrayed within this exquisite work, such as the armor and the lectern have been interpreted as representing Federico's many pursuits, as well as the possibility of being symbolic of his attributes. (Cheles, 1982) The squirrel, a known symbol for prudence and industriousness and equated with the epitome of the Renaissance rulers, was a prominent figure amongst the scenes, indicating that Montefeltro was worthy of being

known as the “squirrel” himself. (Stokstad & Cothren, 2011) In Cheles’ thorough examination of the symbolism of the studiolo, he states,

“...[some of the imagery may] stand for Grammar, Rhetoric, Arithmetic, Music, and Astronomy... [and] Geometry is probably freely evoked by the mazzocchio [mazzocchio being defined as being part of fifteenth-century headwear, an actual “donut” shaped throat collar]... the presence of the mazzocchio indicates that the decorations are not a purely mechanical display of well-established symbols, but also incorporate less codified images. Thus, the astrolabe hanging next to the sphere reiterates the reference to Astronomy; while the book marked TVLIO, stresses the presence of Rhetoric. So does, quite possibly, the unusual association of the parrots and the clock, for those motifs suggest the well-regulated art of speaking.” (Cheles, 1982)

Figure 5 A portion of the studiolo:



Figure 6 Detail:



Figure 6 Detail:



The studiolo has been studied, analyzed, and reinterpreted many times by many scholars. For me, the sheer magnitude of this undertaking is what captures my attention. The beauty, alone, is breathtaking, aside from any supposed symbolism or hidden political agenda or propaganda. To stand in a room where the blueprint itself is irregular and interesting would be awe-inspiring, but add to that, this incredible incorporation of artwork that literally tricks the eye into believing there are open cupboards stuffed full of books, windows overlooking vast vistas, and alcoves with idealized sculptures, yet is a flat surface, that is sheer brilliance and embodies the ever-increasing intelligences and discoveries of the Renaissance.

The Crest of the Wave

The sixteenth century is when the Renaissance period hits its crest with the High Renaissance masters, such as Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, and Raphael. This century was the age of excitement and upheaval on all levels of the human existence across Europe. Socially, intellectually, and religiously, people were changing and that was changing the face of culture. The humanist approach of earlier centuries gave way to deeper, extensive exploration of human anatomy, foreign worlds, and scientific frontiers. People were facing into their beliefs about the world at large, discovering that, rather than being a flat plane where, when one reached its limits one would fall off and topple into oblivion to be lost forever, earth was actually a *sphere*.

In Germany, the miraculous invention of the printing press by Johannes Gutenberg in the mid-to-late 1400's changed the face of everything, increasing the production of books and the distribution of information. Because of this dispersal of information to

everyone, the disparity between the “have’s” and the “have not’s” was growing slimmer. The common people wanted to learn to read, understand what was happening in the world, and have access to the information that had only been available to the wealthy in the past.

Travel was becoming more common. Therefore, artists – and their art – also became mobile, transforming the artistic society to one of an international community. Artists went to foreign lands to learn from others who were superior in arts that they had not yet mastered, or even seen before. Within Italy, at the start of the 16th century, the government was still formed into city-states that fought each other for shifting alliances. The Popes were intricately involved in state affairs, using diplomacy and military force to gain control over their populace and even, at times, behaved as worldly, instead of religious, leaders to establish family members as hereditary rulers. (Stokstad & Cothren, 2011)

This was a time of indulgences. People contributed monetarily to support the Church and were promised in return to be forgiven of their sins and be eternally saved. The Church was rising in power, wealth, and populace and, with it, the leaders were growing greedy, corrupt, and vain. Art was commissioned to aggrandize the popes’ already extravagant lifestyles. It was also the time of the rise of the Protestant movement that was in direct opposition to the Church.

The political manipulation of Pope Clement VII led to conflict with the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V and resulted in the “Sack of Rome” in May 1527. This 6-month ordeal of murdering, plundering, and burning shook the stability and humanistic ideals that had been characterized by the Renaissance and many artists fled the area in search of safer lands in which to create their art.

The patrons of this era highly valued their artists and the works they created. Artisans aligned themselves with influential benefactors, sometimes, like Titian, becoming knighted members of the royal court. During this era, we find artists who become entrepreneurs and gain celebrity status, as they sold works on the side and created an international following outside of Italy and its courts and churches. Artists began tracking their own lives in journals and diaries, telling the tales of their lives and keeping notes of their work, sketches in progress, and ideas for the future. These books have become priceless works of art in and of themselves, as it has given us the opportunity to look inside the minds of these geniuses.

In addition, their contemporaries began writing about these artists, sharing descriptions of their physical appearances, their mannerisms, and their conduct. Suddenly, these artisans became important figures in society simply because information about them could be disseminated amongst the people. Finally, artists could become revered for more than the “job” they were doing, but could be seen as the masters that they were. They began to be noticed for their extensive education, mastery of mathematics and logic, understanding of the human form, and their divinely inspired ability to create elaborate masterpieces and long-lasting, monumental displays of art.

The sixteenth century was an abundant time for Italians. People prospered. Wealth was growing. Education was expanding and becoming available to more people. Art was also changing. The preferred mediums of tempera and fresco were giving way to the more flexible medium of oils. The commissions for art were now coming from more private sources. This provided independence for the artists because they no longer had to depend on the backing of the Church, court, or government as sole commissioners of work.

As representative of this important transition in art and Italy, at large, I have chosen to share one piece of work from each of the three masters of the High Renaissance period. It is only fitting that each of them be represented in a piece of work that I feel best encompasses the climate and richness of this era.

First, Raphael and the frescoed walls of the *Stanza della Segnatura* [Figures 8 & 9] in the Vatican, Rome developed 1510-1511. I will specifically focus on *The School of Athens* panel [Figures 10-13], which is only one of the four walls in this mural. Raphael's work fully encompasses the movement of the era that has come to be known as the High Renaissance. With a masterful display of every form of perspective, classical idealism, and a nod to law, theology, and philosophy, Raphael presents us with a work of grand scale that is intriguing to look at, as well as informative of that time in history. The colors are bright and vivid. The lighting is bright with the play of the shadows feeling realistic. The representation of architecture is portrayed in perfected proportion. The figures are classically ideal, beautifully painted, and realistically rendered with human emotions on their faces.

Figures 8 & 9 The four walls:



Figure 10 *The School of Athens:*



Figure 11-12 *The School of Athens detail:*



Figure 13 *The School of Athens* detail:

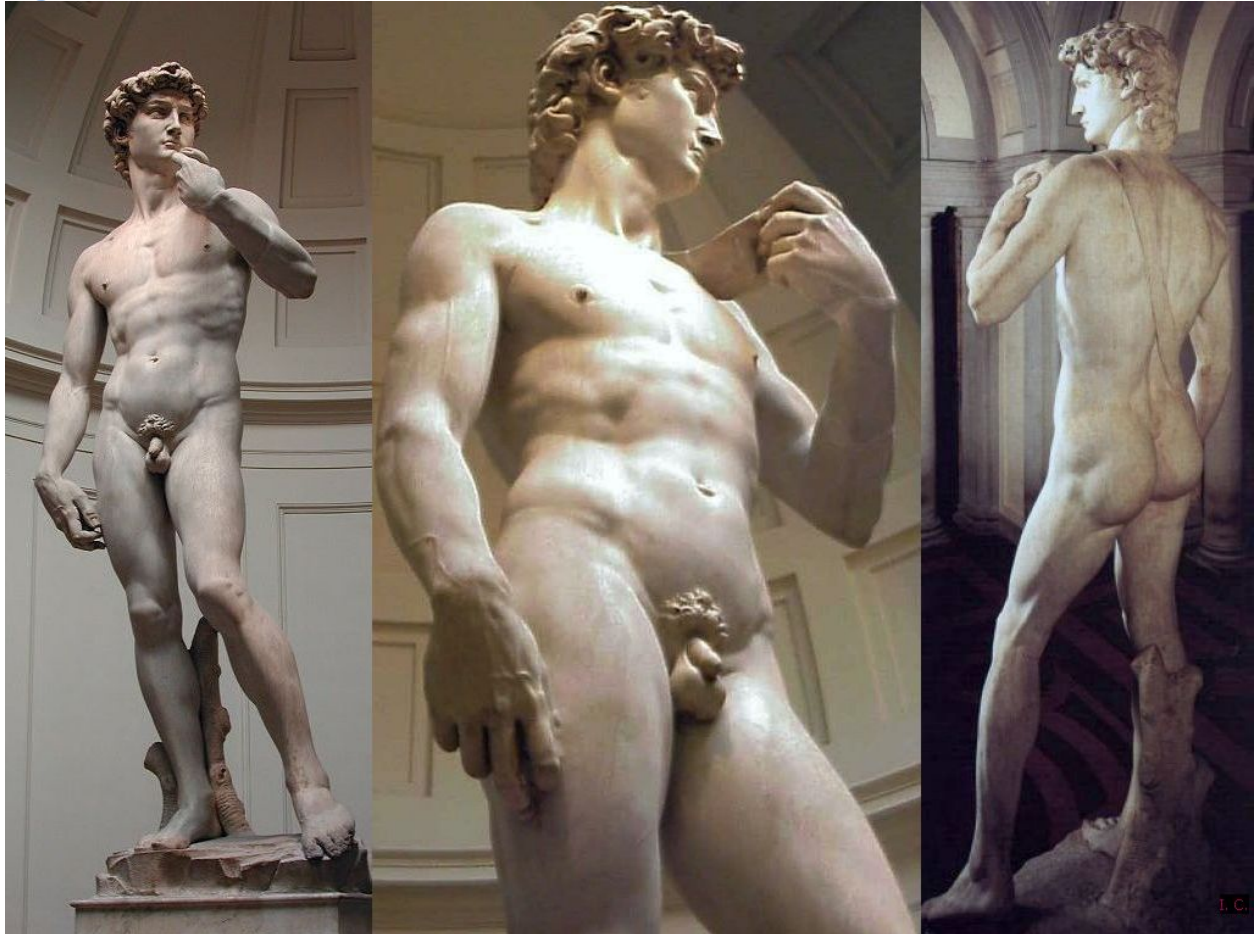


While looking into the work of Michelangelo, it is tempting to delve into the spectacular work in the Sistine Chapel. The sheer magnitude of this project fully encompasses the ever-broadening expanse of horizons around the world during the High Renaissance era. However, all temptations aside, my favorite work of Michelangelo is his elegant marble statue, *David*, [Figure 14] (Galleria dell'Accademia) which was completed in 1504 and, with much pomp and circumstance, was rolled in a wooden cage, running on greased beams for four days through the streets of Florence (Michelangelo's David) to settle in the *Piazza della Signoria* in the heart of the city.

This work embodies the movement of Renaissance art in its highly idealized, classical features of the Biblical figure of David *just before* he faces off with the Giant he will slay. It captures his confidence, his strength, his preparation, and poses him in the contraposto position, where all of his weight is counterbalanced on one foot. This mammoth sculpture stands 17 feet high, without the pedestal upon which it is mounted

and was designed to be placed atop a building and viewed from below. Michelangelo took that viewpoint into consideration, making the proportions gigantic in the lower portion and receding toward the top, so when viewed from below, everything looked natural.

Figure 14 *David:*



Michelangelo worked from a small wax model that he submersed it into water. Each day, he would let out a small portion of the water to reveal what aspects of David would emerge that day. Working from an 18-foot block of pristine marble, he carved from front to back, literally birthing the statuesque form of the biblical hero from its depths. His methods, his approach, his perfection, his planning, and his execution of this project combined is a pure example of the High Renaissance.

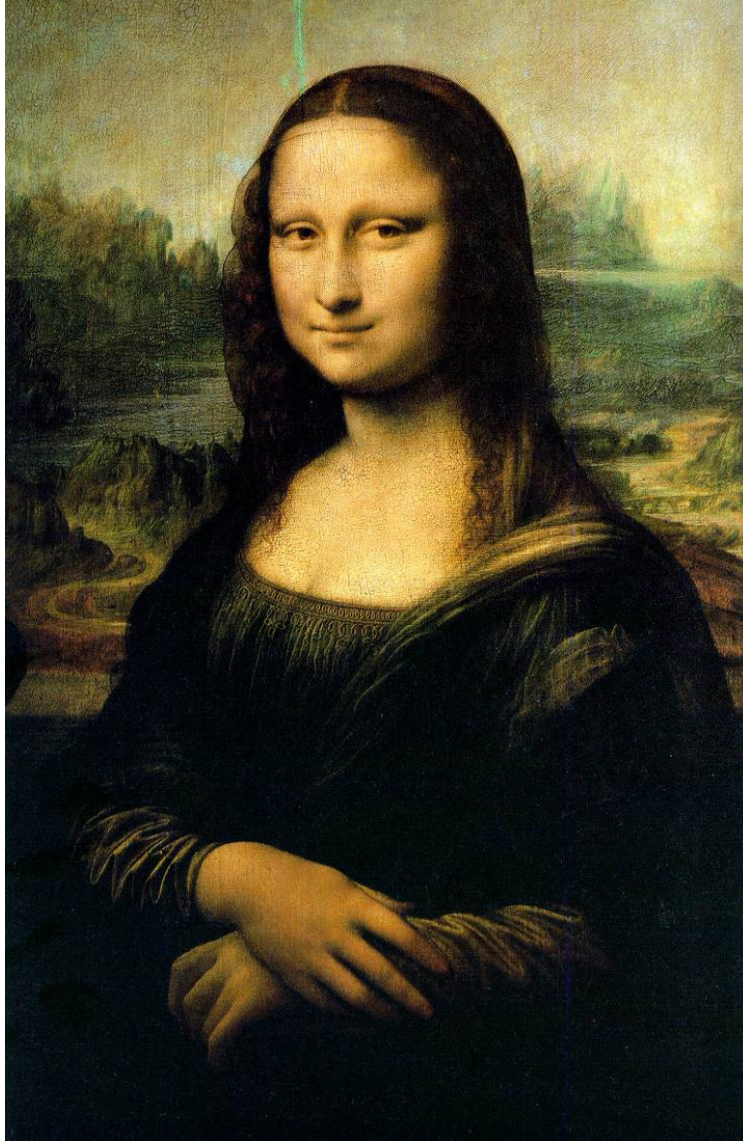
Last, but certainly not the least, is my favorite of the High Renaissance artists, Leonardo da Vinci. This *man* encompasses what I believe is the definition of the ideals of the Renaissance era. An inventor, engineer, scientist, curious note-taker, anatomist and continual observer of all things, Leonardo is the embodiment of the Renaissance. His interests were vast and varied; everything from anatomy to hydraulics, from canals to flight, and to mythical, mystical, magical concepts. He is famous for very few works of art because his many interests took him away from creating art. He was known for starting many projects and finishing very few. However, he left behind a mountain of research that is still being explored today, inventions that were long before his time, and musings that have left many stumped. His journals, notes, and diagrams were all written in a backward language that many have said was done to hide his discoveries from his contemporaries.

I wanted to choose an obscure piece for this time period as a representation of his work, however, I kept returning to the ever-famous, often-mocked, frequently-replicated, duplicated, and caricaturized *Mona Lisa* [Figure 15] that was completed in 1506 and retained in Leonardo's personal collection for his entire life. The woman in the painting has not been identified but is rumored to be Lisa Gherardini del Giocondo, the wife of a prominent Florentine merchant. (Stokstad & Cothren, 2011)

I chose this piece for several reasons. First, it breaks the rules. The Renaissance was all about breaking the rules, breaking through boundaries, exploring new frontiers in all things. In fitting with the rebirth of knowledge and expanding horizons, Leonardo broke the rules by having this upper-class Florentine woman gazing boldly out of the canvas at the viewer, almost as though she is challenging us. Secondly, she is clothed as an upper-class woman would have dressed in that time, however she is missing the plethora of

jewelry that she would have worn to set her apart. Thirdly, women of that time were portrayed in profile and were beautiful, opulent females that portrayed the wealth and chastity of a proper woman. Often times, their hands were cut off and their hair was up. The *Mona Lisa* is in direct contradiction of all of that.

Figure 15 *Mona Lisa*:



The other aspects of this work of art that exemplifies the Renaissance is the medium: oil on wood, as well as the style. Her strong pyramidal positioning hails back to antiquity and sacred geometry, and the placement of her in the front of an ethereal

background that seems to go on forever is a grand example of the expertise of these Renaissance artists in portraying depth of field. What strikes me the most about this piece is her skin. Using *sfumato* – the dusky, soft, hazy modeling of her skin – Leonardo creates the sensation that she is a tangible human being, rather than a single-dimensional piece of wood. It seems that, if you were to reach out and touch her, you would encounter a soft, pliable, silky feeling of the skin of an affluent woman. This piece, by many virtues, is High Renaissance.

In researching this era in art, I have gained a rich understanding of what was happening in the land of my ancestors during this time in history. I have developed a deeper love of the Renaissance art and a profound respect for the artisans themselves, their craft, and their abilities. The Renaissance is truly a period of strongly impactful changes in the world that has carried on through the ages. Timeless in its appearance, art from these centuries has been preserved as a way to remind us that, through persistence and curiosity, man will grow and expand, explore and discover, and eventually master anything he puts his mind to.

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Artwork Resources

- [The Effects of Good Government in the City and in the Country: *The Effects of Good Government in the City and in the Country*](http://www.wga.hu/html_m/l/lorenzetti/ambrogio/governme/index.html). (n.d.). Retrieved April 26, 2013, from wga.hu: http://www.wga.hu/html_m/l/lorenzetti/ambrogio/governme/index.html
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