Humanism and its influence on the Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, and Music of the Italian Renaissance

In the paintings that follow, analyze how they embody some or all of the following Humanist values: a love of classical antiquity, individualism, secularism (non-religious themes; Naturalism – depicting objects as they exist in nature, including the use of depth-perception to capture the three dimension in nature on a two-dimensional canvas), and civic humanism.

Primavera by Botticelli

Painted by Botticelli. Finished in 1482. Size: 80 x 124 inches. Commissioned by the Medici family. Located today in the Uffizi Museum in Florence. Primavera is also known as the Allegory of Spring. It is an elaborate mythological allegory of the burgeoning fertility of the world. On the right, Zephyrus (the biting wind of winter) grabs the nymph, Chloris (a minor female nature deity). Her union with Zephyrus transforms her into Flora (goddess of spring and flowers). She is then pictured in a floral dress scattering flowers throughout the garden. Venus (goddess of love, beauty, fertility), in the center, presides over the garden. On the left, the three Graces (beauty, joy, and charm) dance, unaware that one of them is being targeted by a blindfolded Cupid flying overhead. Cupid was the god of erotic love and desire. On the left, Mercury (god of messages, eloquence, and trade) dissipates the clouds with his staff.
Birth of Venus by Botticelli

Painted by Botticelli. Finished in 1485. Size: 68 x 110 inches. Commissioned by the Medici family. Located today in the Uffizi Museum in Florence. It depicts the Roman goddess Venus (goddess of love, beauty, fertility). Venus has been born at sea and arrives naked on the shore as a fully grown woman. On her left the winds blow gently caressing her hair, on her right a handmaid (Ora) waits to dress her shy body.
Painted by Raphael between 1509 and 1511. A fresco (a wall painting done on fresh plaster so the paint becomes an integral part of the wall). Located in the private residence of the Pope in the Vatican. Size: 17 x 25 feet. Commissioned by Pope Julius II. It is a celebration of the great intellectuals of the classical world. The two figures in the center are Plato (in red) and Aristotle (in blue). Other figures include Socrates, Pythagoras, Euclid, Archimedes, Anaximander, and Ptolemy. The two sculptures in the background are those of Apollo Roman god of light) on the left, and the Roman goddess Minerva (goddess of wisdom) on the right. Raphael included himself in the painting (front row, second from right. He’s looking straight at the viewer).
An ink on paper drawing by Leonardo da Vinci. It is sometimes called the Canon of Proportions or the Proportions of Man. Completed in 1490. Size: 13 x 10 inches). Today it is located in the Accademia Art Gallery in Venice. It depicts a naked male figure inside a square and a circle. The drawing is based on the correlations of ideal human proportions with geometry described by the ancient Roman architect Vitruvius in the text above the drawing. It includes information such as: the length of the outspread arms is equal to the height of a man; the maximum width of the shoulders is a quarter of the height of a man.
Mona Lisa by Leonardo da Vinci

Begun in 1503 but not completed until 1519. Size 30 x 21 inches. Located today in the Louvre Museum, Paris. Thought to be a portrait of Lisa Gherardini, the wife of Francesco del Giocondo, a wealthy Florentine silk merchant. Mona in Italian is a polite form of address originating as ma donna —similar to Ma’am, Madam, or my lady in English. In Italy, the painting is called La Gioconda (the jovial one), an obvious pun on the feminine form of Lisa’s last name. The subject is seated in a pose artists often used to depict the Virgin Mary. Leonardo uses a technique called Sfumato, in which no harsh lines are used to separate colors. Instead, there’s a gradual transition – a sort of smoky effect. Behind the woman is an imaginary landscape.
Humanist Values reflected in Renaissance Sculpture

*David* by Donatello

Completed in the 1440s, this was the first free-standing bronze statue created since classical times. It is not attached to a building and is not part of a group of figures. It was also the first nude statue since ancient Rome. It depicts a youthful, slightly effeminate, David standing on the head of the giant, Goliath. David holds Goliath’s sword in his right hand. The Bible says that David went into battle without armor but doesn’t say he was naked. This work was commissioned by Cosimo de Medici for his private residence in Florence. The nude statue was a little too controversial to be displayed in a public square. By the end of the 15th century, Florentines were more accustomed to nude statues being displayed in public. The biblical David was a symbol of Florence which had just repelled an attack by the militaristic Duchy of Milan.

Size: 5 feet 2 inches. Location: Bargello Museum, Florence.
**David** by Michelangelo

Completed in 1504. Carved from a single block of marble. Michelangelo said that he didn’t create David; rather he freed David from his marble tomb as one would free a body frozen in ice. Commissioned by Florence city council, it was originally meant to go on the Cathedral, but the council changed its mind and placed it at the entrance of the Palazzo Vecchio – City Hall. Michelangelo uses the classical technique of Contrapposto (counterpose). The weight is all on David’s right leg. His left leg is relaxed. This gives the statue a more life-like pose. David has a stone in his right hand and a slingshot in his left. Unlike Donatello’s David, it’s before he slays Goliath. Michelangelo secretly dissected many cadavers in order to perfect his knowledge of the human body!

Size: 14 feet tall. Location: Academy Gallery, Florence. (copy at the Palazzo Vecchio)
Completed in 1499. Marble. It depicts the dead Christ, having been taken down from the cross, in the lap of his mother. It merges the biblical story with classical ideals of the beauty of the human form. Great attention is paid to the details of Christ’s body – the natural pose, the rib cage, the exposed neck, the flesh bulging where Mary’s right hand cradles underneath his arm. Mary is young, beautiful, strong and in deep mourning. Her open left hand represents a struggle to understand. Across Mary’s chest on a sash are the words: MICHAELA[N]GELUS BONAROTUS FLORENTIN[US] FACIEBA[T] (Michelangelo Buonarroti, Florentine, made this). Michelangelo inserted this later because he heard people were disputing the identity of the sculptor!
Size: 5.5 x 6.5 feet. Location: St. Peter’s Basilica, Vatican.
Humanist Values reflected in Renaissance Architecture

The doors of the Baptistery by Ghiberti

Built in the Middle Ages, the octagonal Baptistery was the most beloved building in Florence. After all, this is where all Florentines were baptized. During the Renaissance, the guilds of the city decided to beautify the building. A great deal of discussion centered on the doors. Quite symbolic – a baby entered as a non-baptized soul and exited as a member of the Catholic Church which was his ticket to Heaven when he died. A competition was held to select the best sculptor. The result was a tie between Lorenzo Ghiberti and Filippo Brunelleschi. The commission would be split between them. Brunelleschi stormed off in a huff, believing two geniuses couldn’t work together. Brunelleschi went to Rome to study architecture. The 23-year old Ghiberti spent the rest of his life creating and installing stunning gilded bronze panels depicting scenes from the Bible. In true Renaissance style, Ghiberti included a small bust of himself on the east door! Michelangelo said the doors were as beautiful as the Gates of Paradise, and they have been called this ever since.

The doors were created between 1401 and 1452. Today, the doors on the Baptistery are copies. The originals are located in the Duomo (Cathedral) Museum nearby.
Completed between 1420 and 1436. The Cathedral had been started in 1296 and by 1419 was complete except for the dome. No-one had built a dome in Europe since the fall of the Roman Empire. The technique had been lost. It was an embarrassment to the city to have a cathedral open to the elements. Brunelleschi was a superb sculptor but had lost the competition to sculpt new doors for the Baptistery. So, he decided to make a name for himself by designing a dome for the Cathedral! He went to Rome to study the dome of the Pantheon, built by the ancient Romans, and came up with a design he was sure would work in Florence. However, he refused to reveal his plan to Florence city council, fearful that they would steal it and hire someone else to do the job. Instead, Brunelleschi demanded they trust his genius, and, of course, pay him a lot of money. The council was reluctant to give his the commission without seeing the plans. Finally, Cosimo de Medici intervened and Brunelleschi got the green light. Cosimo staked his reputation on Brunelleschi. If the dome collapsed so too might his influence in the city. Of course, the dome didn’t fall and in 1436, the completed Cathedral was consecrated by the Pope with great fanfare. Brunelleschi had just built the first dome in Europe in over 1000 years. He had used over 4 million bricks to span a 140 foot wide space. Including the lantern on top, the Cathedral is 375 feet in height. At the time, it was the largest dome ever built. To this day the dome of the Cathedral is called Brunelleschi’s Dome.
The villa was begun by Andrea Palladio in 1567 and completed by other architects after his death in 1580. It was commissioned by a priest upon his retirement from the Vatican. It is modeled on the Pantheon in Rome. Palladio intended the villa to be a complete celebration of classical architectural styles. It is a perfectly square building with an identical projecting portico on each side. Each portico has six Ionic columns. There are three free-standing statues of Greek and Roman gods on the roof over each portico. In the center of the interior square is a perfect circular room (a rotunda) capped by a dome.

Location: outside Venice.

Note: Andrea Palladio wrote a very influential book explaining the rules of classical architecture. A style of architecture, called Palladian, became very popular throughout Europe, and also, later in the United States. You might be familiar with Thomas Jefferson’s home in Monticello, Virginia, which is based on the Villa Rotonda.
Humanist Values reflected in Renaissance Music

Sacred music in the Middle Ages was basically monophonic chant. All-male choirs would sing the same notes together. The aim was to eliminate all individuality and to collectively sound as if only one voice was singing. Praising God was the objective, not celebrating individual human voices.

During the Renaissance, sacred music became polyphonic. Choirs were still all-male, but they now included a wide range of voices, from bass at the lowest end to soprano at the highest end (the high notes were sung by pre-pubescent boys). Beautiful harmonies were created to showcase individual voices.

The two most famous composers in Renaissance Italy were actually born in the Netherlands. Guillaume Dufay (1400-1474) and Josquin des Prez (1440-1521) traveled throughout northern Italy, composing, teaching, and staging concerts. They are primarily responsible for popularizing polyphonic music.