

Italian Renaissance

The Renaissance, that astonishing revival of the arts and sciences that began in fourteenth-century Italy, grew out of a new interest in and awareness of antiquity, widespread economic prosperity and a new-found appreciation of the natural and secular world. The position of the visual arts changed, as gradually but irreversibly craft became art and craftsmen became artists. Characteristics of Renaissance art, such as the invention of linear perspective, an empirical interest in anatomical realism and a focus on compositional harmony and Classical beauty, are closely related to contemporary developments in literature, science and philosophy. Florence, Rome and Venice were all centres of the Italian Renaissance, but important developments took place in all the different city-states on the peninsula.

In 1550, Giorgio Vasari published his *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, arguably the first art history book. In Vasari's ordering, the Florentine artist Giotto di Bondone (1266/7–1337) was responsible for the rebirth of the arts. Giotto's fresco cycle in the Scrovegni chapel in Padua still has an unmistakably medieval narrative structure, but individual scenes such as the *Lamentation over the Dead Christ* (4) contain typical Renaissance elements: a balanced composition with monumental figures, the use of foreshortening (in the angels) and overlapping figures to create depth, and an emotional rendering that makes the cries of the mourners almost audible.

Three of the greatest masters of the High Renaissance worked in Florence: Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519), Raphael (1483–1520) and Michelangelo (1475–1564). Leonardo and Michelangelo were archetypal 'Renaissance men', versed in many disciplines,

among them architecture, sculpture, painting and engineering. Leonardo's interest in anatomy and the *sfumato* technique, using soft shading rather than line to delineate form, is evident in the portrait of Cecilia Gallerani (5), mistress of the Duke of Milan. Michelangelo's *David* (1), created for a niche in the Duomo of Florence before being installed in front of the Palazzo Vecchio, the most honorific site in the city, is an icon of the Italian Renaissance. The overlarge head and upper body reflect the high position for which it was originally sculpted, and the *contrapposto* pose, with the weight on one leg, emulates ancient statuary (see p.346, fig.2). The artist's Neo-Platonic education at the Medici court would influence his work from then on.

Raphael, born in the central Italian town of Urbino, spent time in Florence at the beginning of the sixteenth century but found his greatest fame in Rome, where he earned lucrative commissions for large altarpieces and frescoes. In direct competition with Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel frescoes, Raphael painted the *School of Athens* (3) for Pope Julius II. Leading philosophers gather round Aristotle and Plato in a building modelled on the ancient baths that Raphael saw in Rome. The subject matter, depiction of the figures and harmonious composition all reflect the Classicism of High Renaissance style.

Like his Florentine colleagues, Giovanni Bellini (c.1430–1516) set out to create harmonious compositions, but with a Venetian focus on colour and light instead of *disegno* (see pp.300–01). In the *San Giobbe Altarpiece* (2), he employed a warm light and bright colours to meld the figures of Virgin, Child and saints with the Classicizing architectural elements, including Corinthian pilasters and mosaic vault.

1 Michelangelo, *David*, 1501–04
Marble, h: 430 cm / 169 in
Galleria dell'Accademia, Florence

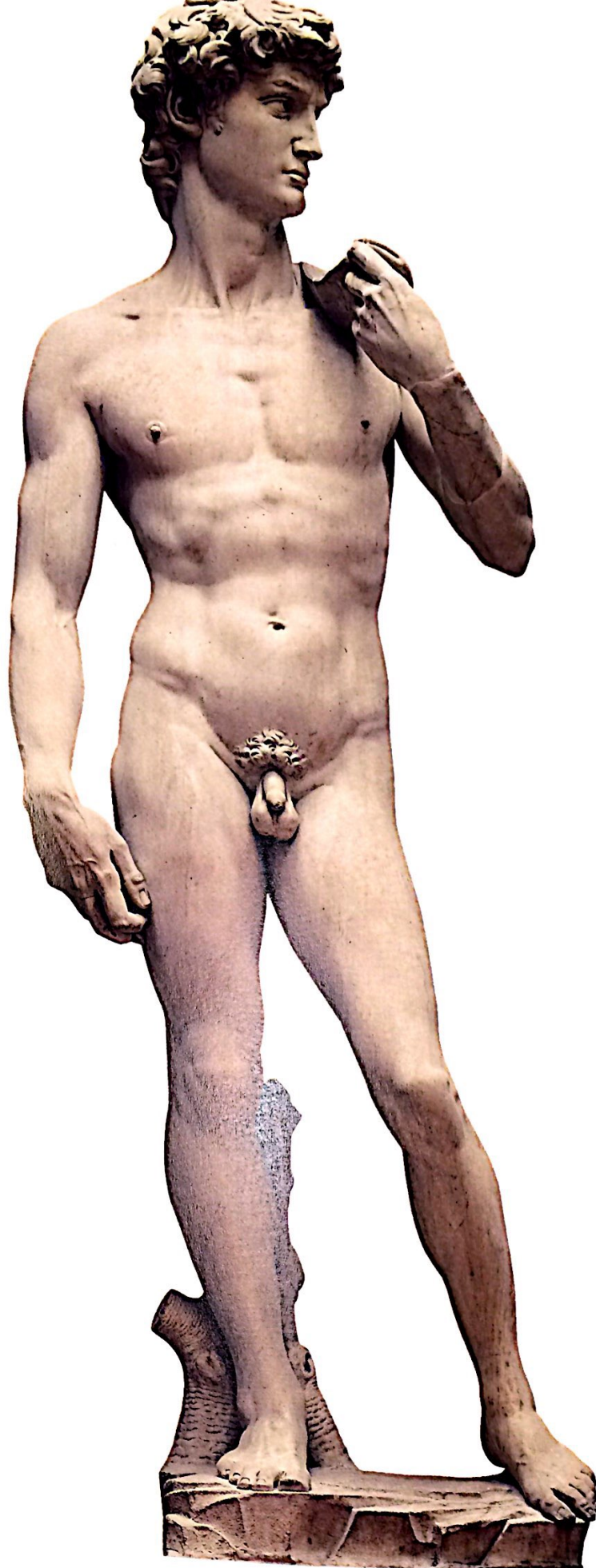
2 Giovanni Bellini, *San Giobbe Altarpiece*, c.1485
Oil on panel, 471 × 258 cm / 185 × 102 in
Accademia, Venice

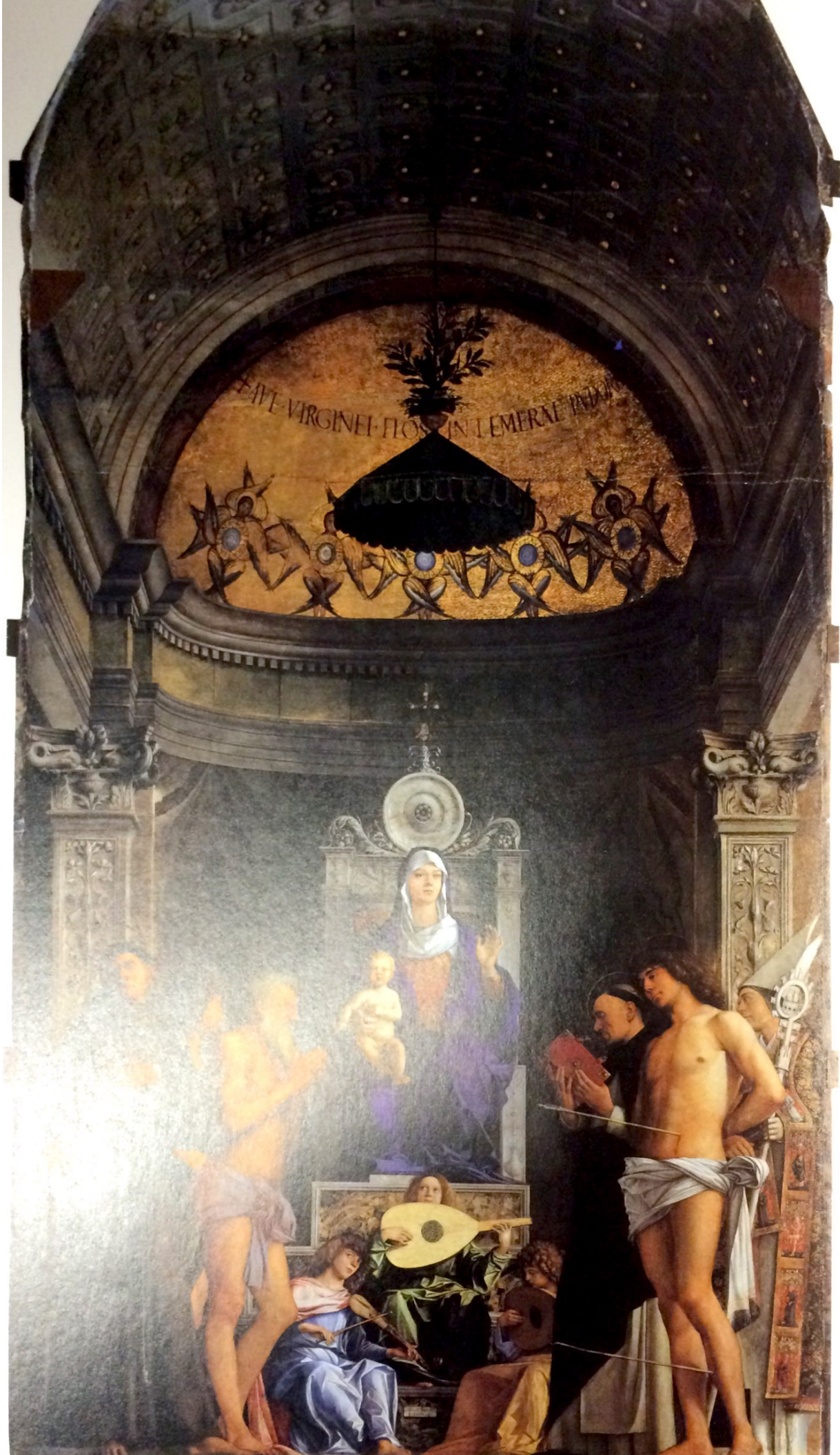
3 Raphael, *School of Athens*, 1509–10
Fresco, 580 × 820 cm / 19 × 27 ft
Musei Vaticani, Rome

4 Giotto, *Lamentation over the Dead Christ*, c.1305–06
Fresco, 190 × 198 cm / 74¾ × 78½ in
Scrovegni Chapel, Padua

5 Leonardo da Vinci, *Lady with an Ermine*
(Cecilia Gallerani), 1489–90
Oil on panel, 54 × 39 cm / 21 × 15 in
Czartoryski Museum, Kraków

Holy Roman Emperor Charles V sacks Rome; many artists flee	1517	
	1514	Raphael succeeds Bramante as architect of St Peter's; at his death in 1520, Antonio da Sangallo will take over, modifying the plan to a Latin cross
Niccolò Machiavelli writes <i>Il Principe</i> ('The Prince'), one of the earliest books of modern political philosophy	1513	
	1508	Raphael begins painting stanze in the Vatican Palace, including <i>The School of Athens</i> Luca Signorelli completes the fresco cycle on the walls of the Sistine Chapel, and Julius II commissions Michelangelo to paint the ceiling; it will be completed in 1512
	1503–13	Reign of Pope Julius II; he commissions Bramante to design a new St Peter's Basilica, begun in 1506
	1501–04	Michelangelo carves his <i>David</i> , symbolizing the Florentine Republic's challenge to foreign intervention
	1498–99	Michelangelo carves his <i>Pieta</i> for the tomb of a French cardinal in St Peter's Basilica, Rome
The Medici are exiled from Florence; the religious reformer Fra Girolamo Savonarola condemns Florentines' corruption and worldliness, burning books and artworks before being executed in 1498	1494–1512	
Charles VIII of France seizes Naples, launching a series of wars between France and Spain for several Italian city-states	1494	
Poet, scholar and humanist Lorenzo ('il Magnifico') Medici comes to power in Florence	1469	
	1452–65	Piero della Francesca paints the fresco cycle <i>Legend of the True Cross</i> for the Church of San Francesco, Arezzo
Filippo Brunelleschi completes the unprecedented ribbed dome of the cathedral in Florence	1436	Fra Angelico moves with the Dominican friars of Fiesole to the convent of San Marco in Florence, where he paints frescoes for the convent interior
	1435–65	Leon Battista Alberti writes the influential treatises <i>On Painting</i> , <i>On Architecture</i> and <i>On Sculpture</i>
	1427	Massaccio's <i>Holy Trinity</i> in Santa Maria Novella, Florence, uses the first true linear perspective
Death of Petrarch, considered the first humanist	1374	Lorenzo Ghiberti creates the bronze doors of the Baptistery of San Giovanni, Florence







3

