

Northern Renaissance

Philip of Spain launches the Spanish Armada against England	1588	
Michel de Montaigne publishes his <i>Essays</i>	1580-90	
Mary, Queen of Scots, is forced to abdicate; James VI (later James I of England) becomes king	1567	
Life of William Shakespeare	1564-1616	
Nicolas Copernicus' <i>De Revolutionibus</i> argues that the earth circles the sun, rather than the opposite	1543	
Thomas Cromwell supervises the dissolution of monasteries and convents in England	1536-39	
Henry VIII annuls his marriage to Catherine of Aragon, marries Anne Boleyn and is excommunicated	1533	
Spanish conquest of Peru	1532-72	Hans Holbein the Younger settles in London in 1532
Ferdinand Magellan circumnavigates the globe	1519-22	
Spanish conquest of Mexico	1519-21	
Sir Thomas More publishes <i>Utopia</i> , on the ideal state	1516	
	1508	Painter Jan Gossaert visits Italy and is among the earliest artists to introduce Italian Renaissance motifs into the Low Countries
Portuguese claim Brazil and establish trading posts in India and Sri Lanka	1498-1505	
Vasco da Gama voyages to India	1497-99	
	1495-1516	Hieronymus Bosch uses the triptych format of religious paintings for secular and disturbing allegories of human folly
Christopher Columbus sails to the West Indies	1492	
	1494	Albrecht Dürer makes the first of two journeys to Italy
Bartolomeu Dias rounds the Cape of Good Hope and establishes a sea route to Asia	1488	
Ferdinand and Isabella establish the Inquisition in Spain	1478	
Wars of the Roses between the houses of Lancaster and York in England; Henry Tudor claims the throne	1455-85	
Johannes Gutenberg produces the Mazarin Bible, the earliest book printed with movable type	1455	
	1432	Jan van Eyck completes the <i>Adoration of the Lamb</i> (the Ghent Altarpiece); he is credited by Vasari with being the first to use oil paints on panel

Northern Renaissance art refers to that created outside of Italy during the period of the European Renaissance, from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century. The most important centres were in Paris, Germany and, especially, the rich merchant cities of the Burgundian Netherlands (Brussels, Bruges, Ghent and Antwerp). Diplomacy, trade and cultural exchange meant that there was ongoing communication north and south of the Alps, and an increasing cosmopolitanism in Northern Renaissance subject matter. Northern European artists produced some of the most refined and technically advanced art on the continent, in such media as oil painting, manuscript illumination, tapestry, sculpture and printmaking. New and improved techniques, especially in painting and printmaking, enabled northern painters to portray texture, movement and emotion with exquisite detail and verisimilitude.

Jan van Eyck (c.1390-1441) used the new technique of oil painting to reach unprecedented levels of pictorial illusionism, as finely layered oil glazes allowed a much more precise calibration of colours and textures than the tempera pigments characteristic of Italian paintings. On the *Altarpiece of the Lamb* (2), also known as the Ghent Altarpiece, the central Deësis of Christ, the Virgin and John the Baptist is shown in an archaic frontal pose, but elsewhere the detailed scenes are highly innovative, from the dazzling depictions of plants and gemstones and fabrics, to the first nudes in Northern Renaissance art. In his *Crucifixion* (5), which was also painted in oils, Rogier van der Weyden (1399-1464) illustrates Mary's intense yet subdued sorrow by giving sculptural weight to her drapery and a nearly tangible realism to her tears. The red background grid serves to focus attention of

the emotions of the figures and anchors all three in an almost abstract arrangement of shapes, and the result is strangely modern.

Classical antiquity was not as important a theme in northern Europe as it was for artists in Italy, but from the early sixteenth century, Northern Renaissance painters started to appropriate Italian elements into their work. Following a journey to Italy, Jan Gossaert (c.1478-1532) introduced mythological scenes with erotic nudes to northern art. In *Danae* (4), the sensual mythological beauty receives Jupiter, disguised as golden rain, in her lap. Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528) was also fascinated by Classical antiquity, and made two trips to Italy to study ancient sculpture and the work of contemporary artists such as Andrea Mantegna. His studies sparked an interest in the human form that can be seen in *Adam and Eve* (3). The easily portable woodcuts and engravings of Dürer, the greatest printmaker of the Renaissance, had an extraordinary impact on artists of his own and future generations.

Hans Holbein the Younger (c.1497-1543), brought the Northern Renaissance from his native Germany to England, where he painted stunningly detailed portraits of the royal family, courtiers and merchants. In *The Ambassadors* (1), which portrays two French emissaries to the court of Henry VIII amid signs of wealth, science, art and diplomacy, the distorted skull in the foreground reminds the viewer that wealth and power nevertheless inevitably end in death.

1 Hans Holbein, *The Ambassadors*, 1533
Oil on panel, 207 × 209 cm / 81½ × 82¾ in
National Gallery, London

2 Jan and Hubert van Eyck, *Altarpiece of the Lamb*, 1423-32
Oil on panel, 350 × 460 cm / 137¾ × 181½ in
St Bavo Cathedral, Ghent, Belgium

3 Albrecht Dürer, *Adam and Eve*, 1505
Engraving, 25.1 × 20 cm / 10 × 7¾ in
Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art, New York

4 Jan Gossaert Mabuse, *Danae*, 1527
Oil tempera on wood, 114 × 95 cm / 45 × 37¼ in
Alte Pinakothek, Munich, Germany

5 Rogier van der Weyden, *Crucifixion*, 1454-6
Oil on panel, 325 × 192 cm / 128 × 75¾ in
Museos Reales, El Escorial Monastery, Spain





2



