ART OF THE WESTERN WORLD
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PROGRAMME THREE: THE EARLY RENAISSANCE

Part 1: Early Renaissance Art in Florence

MICHAEL WOOD PIECE TO CAMERA OVERLOOKING Siena

This is Siena, a wonderfully preserved mediaeval city in Central Italy. At its heyday around 1300, it was one of the most civilised and prosperous places in Europe. And Siena and the other Italian city states of its time, like Florence, can stand as a new beginning in our story of Western art. Hitherto the old mediaeval world view had divided society up simply into the aristocracy at the top, the church, and the labouring masses of the peasantry at the bottom. But in places like this for the first time we see the rise of a new class, conscious of its own identity - the merchants.

These cities were no longer controlled by feudal lords, they were republics. Here in Siena several thousand citizens were eligible for election to the governing bodies which met down there in the Palazzo Pubblico, and

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In the palazzo there is a fresco painted in the 1340's which encapsulates their faith in the secular art of government, in the moderating power of reason. It's called 'The Effects of Good Government'.

This marvellous fresco, painted by Ambrogio Lorenzetti was the first panoramic landscape on this scale in Western Art.

The peasants bringing their produce from the countryside, the merchants going about their business, the elegant ladies of leisure, all are fused into an idealised image of the well governed city state.

Eight years later the Black Death devastated Siena. It killed the artist Lorenzetti and half the population of Europe. It was the greatest catastrophe in the modern history of the West. But, surprisingly, for some regions the plague was a springboard for economic growth.
For the survivors there were new opportunities. Florence recovered particularly quickly. By 1400 this was the city state that dominated central Italy. The bankers and textile merchants were expanding their trading empires all over Europe.

Over the next 100 years an extraordinary interaction took place in Florence: the innovations of artists and architects, the excitement of re-discovering classical achievements, and the patronage of a wealthy commercial class, these key elements brought about a series of artistic and intellectual breakthroughs that came to be known as the Renaissance - literally the re-birth of learning and culture.

In the church of Santa Croce a series of frescoes painted around 1320 were to have a revolutionary effect on Florentine painting.

Here the great merchant families competed with one another to commission the leading artists to decorate their chapels.
In the Chapel of the Bardi family Professor John White of University College London describes how these medieval images came to life.

This is a Franciscan church, and the Franciscans were the passionate preachers of the late mediaeval world. They used their words to tug at the emotions of the faithful, rich and poor alike. And at the same time the painters increasingly tried to bring the gospels and the stories of the saints to life before their very eyes. At first, as you can see, in this late 13th century Franciscan altarpiece, they did it with stiff imposing figures, and with bright doll-like symbolic scenes and images.

And here next door in a much ruined fresco I'm afraid, painted probably only 30 or 40 years later, you can see the revolution represented by the art of Giotto, the great contemporary of the poet Dante. Here is a new soft warm reality, a new humanity and pathos, a new ability to take the faithful back and make them feel that they were actually there and filled with love.
for this loving saint, whose love of Christ and love of life and of the beauties of the world, wrought a transformation in the spiritual life of Europe.

Giotto's frescoes gave a new sense of weight to the human body, a new sense of urgency to narrative painting - they became an academy for later Italian artists.

Raphael and Michelangelo came here to learn from such dramatic images as this in which St. Francis receives the wounds of Christ upon his hands and feet.

Giotto's frescoes brought him immortality, and undying fame to the Chapel of the Bardi.

They, and families like them, were money-lenders to the Popes, and kings of Europe. They were the pioneers of the new world of international finance, and the coinage of Florence - the gold florin - became the common currency of Christendom.
And so it was that John the Baptist, desert saint and enemy of luxury, was painted on the book of rules of the coin makers.

But if the prosperity of Florence was owed to the bankers, the re-birth of its intellectual energy came from a re-discovery of classical culture.

Without ever leaving Santa Croce, we can move into the world of the Renaissance with this tomb of Leonardo Bruni, long time chancellor of Florence, who died in 1444. This was the Florence of the humanists, the students of the classics, of the knowledge and the wisdom of the ancient world. Bruni and men like him tried to put pure Ciceronian Latin into the place of the dog Latin of the Middle Ages.

But they were not mere Latin scholars only. They went right back to the origins of Western thought and the great Greek philosophers. He also wrote a history of Florence, starting with Roman times, and in this great work, he put historical
writing also onto a new footing, both in terms of its literary content and its scholarly underpinning.

And there he lies, his history on his breast, surrounded by a wealth of classical detail - his bier supported by the Roman eagles and his hope of heaven in the roundel of the Virgin and Child above his head.

This monument in itself is a wordless combination of the Christian and the classical.

This is the Pantheon - the most perfectly preserved temple of ancient Rome.

Scholars like Bruni and the artists of Renaissance Florence had a passionate love affair with antiquity. The humanists recovered and translated the texts.

The artists studied the statues and frescoes. But they were not simply copying the achievements of the ancient world - they were transforming them.
This Renaissance design for an ideal city uses classical architecture to create a perfect environment based upon reason and order. And in perhaps the most famous image of man by a Renaissance artist, Leonardo da Vinci is illustrating the Roman author Vitruvius - Man in his ideal proportions is the measure of all things.

Out of their preoccupation with classical harmony and proportion, Renaissance artists created these new images of man and woman.

Inside the Palazzo Vecchio the 5000 or so Florentines who had the right to vote would meet, summoned by the bell in times of crisis.

They were the members of the influential guilds and represented the craftsmen and the most economically important activities -
PISANO RELIEFS

Sculptors and stone workers, textiles, metal workers, masons and builders, lawyers and solicitors.

ST. GEORGE

The engine driving the art of Florence at the beginning of the 15th Century was competition between the guilds, and competition between the artists commissioned by them. The armourers guild paid for this powerful alert image of their patron saint - Saint George by Donatello.

Roman art transformed into a vision of Christian courage.

ST. MATTHEW

The bankers guild paid for Ghiberti's expensive bronze statue of St. Matthew - the patron saint of money changers.

SACRIFICE OF ISAAC

These reliefs are the two front runners for the most famous of all Florentine competitions held in 1401 to decide the commission for new bronze doors for the Baptistery. The subject is the prophet Abraham about to sacrifice his son Isaac and this entry by the young Brunelleschi emphasises the violence of the act.
Abraham holds Isaac by the throat to plunge the knife in. The angel seizes Abraham's wrist in a dramatic last minute intervention.

But Lorenzo Ghiberti won the competition with this relief - immediately acknowledged as an exhibition of unrivalled craftsmanship. The nude figure of Isaac is based on classical models. This is a triumph of the goldsmith's craft, embodying lessons learnt from antique statuary and combining that with a Gothic grace learnt from the art of Northern Europe.

Florence is still a thriving centre of the goldsmith's art. This is the studio of Signor Giorgio Chilleri at the south end of the Ponte Vecchio and he works here as a master with this apprentice craftsmen. A whole generation of famous Florentine artists - Ghiberti, Brunelleschi, Donatello - began work in studios not unlike this, working on just such meticulous and minute creations before moving on in their careers to their monumental works of art.
In such an environment, where the skill of the craftsman is so highly prized, it was inevitable perhaps that their status should rise. Inevitable too that the most brilliant of them - men like Brunelleschi and Donatello - should resent the restrictions which the craft guilds could place on them, and resent too the implication that somehow their work was a menial and mechanical craft.

And so increasingly during this century, such artists came to see themselves as the equals of their patrons, no longer humble, anonymous craftsmen, but self-confident, ambitious, intellectual practitioners of the liberal arts, famous beyond their own city.

Brunelleschi visited Rome, after his unsuccessful submission for the Baptistery doors competition.

There he saw a great city in a state of decay.
The sheer scale of the Roman ruins, and the building techniques he analysed provided inspiration for the greatest problem of structural engineering in Italy - how to complete the Cathedral being built in Florence.

In this great space we are surrounded by a Gothic architecture ripe for the Renaissance. The flat surfaces of the walls, the crisp planar detailing of the piers, with their sharp angles. Not a curve, not a rounded form in sight. It all looks so precise and so completely pre-planned, and yet if we had stood here half a century after they began to build this building we would have seen something very different.

Behind me there you would still have seen the mediaeval houses within these existing foundations, and then as the piers went up, they were still arguing about how high they should be. When they came to those capitals, they had a competition about their precise form, they had plaster, wooden, stone models.
And when all of that was done and they were still arguing about the precise dimensions of the building, they went on for 50 years and not a man in Italy or Europe, let alone in Florence, would have had the foggiest idea of how they could ever put a dome over that great crossing that you see behind me there.

In 1417 a conference of architects was summoned from all over Italy to discuss the problem of how to construct the dome and eventually Brunelleschi was entrusted with the commission.

Standing here and looking down into this 150 foot wide octagonal crossing we can at least get some idea of what it was for Brunelleschi to be confronted by the greatest architectural and engineering challenge which had confronted any Italian architect since the distant days of antiquity.

It was quite impossible to fill this space with a forest of timber, and even if it had been, it would never have supported itself, let alone the weight of the cupola during its construction.
So, Brunelleschi's primary problem and his first triumph was to devise a form of scaffolding which started not at the ground, but 40 feet above our heads, at the top of the drum. And then his second was to build the cupola in such a way that it was self-supporting in the course of its construction.

And this is an important part of Brunelleschi's structural solution: herringbone brickwork. Instead of simply laying rows of bricks horizontally, some of them were laid vertically to provide a kind of internal skeleton locking the horizontal rings of brickwork into place whilst the mortar was setting.

Enormous scale involves enormous weight. And Brunelleschi's master stroke in building his cupola was to devise a double shell, built first of stone and then of brick, to lighten it still further.

We're standing in one of the passageways between these two shells, and that of course solved his whole problem of access for his
building materials and of course the subsequent maintenance, whilst the great ribs which bind the inner and the outer shells together ensure its strength and structural stability.

When you come out into the light, out of the dark passages and tunnels of the dome, you are surrounded by the classical forms of Brunelleschi's lantern. As we look down we see what his great contemporary and fellow architect, Alberti, meant when he spoke of this magnificent cupola rising above the skies, ample enough to encompass in its shadow all the people of Tuscany.

Not only did Brunelleschi's dome dominate the skyline of Florence, he also systematised the science of perspective which was to dominate Western pictorial space until the twentieth century.

In Masaccio's fresco of the Trinity, probably constructed with Brunelleschi's advice on architecture, classical columns and a monumental barrel vault frame the figures of Christ and God the Father.
Here is the interaction of painting, architecture, and the mathematical analysis of space that was unique to the Florentine Renaissance.

In 1419 Brunelleschi had begun the hospital of the Innocenti. It was the first orphanage in Europe to be funded by public donations and the architecture is a delicate blending of the Roman and the Romanesque.

It was Brunelleschi's architecture which the painter Fra Angelico depicted in his fresco of the Annunciation, which awaits you at the top of the stairs of the monastery of San Marco.

Fra Angelico lived and worked here, decorating the monastery with scenes from the New Testament - scenes striking for their simplicity and serenity.

Inside the cells the world seems to retreat, leaving a single image suspended like a spiritual vision.
EXTERIOR SAN MARCO

The buildings and frescoes of San Marco were paid for by one of the wealthiest Florentine bankers, Cosimo de Medici – whose family symbol adorns the walls.

INTERIOR: CELL
S. COSMAS + CRUCIFIXION

St. Cosmas was the patron saint of the Medici family and in Fra Angelico's fresco he kneels at the foot of the Cross.

This painting was at the entrance to the personal cell of Cosimo de Medici who would retreat from the pressures of business into this setting of intense spiritual devotion.

INTERIOR: CELL
ADORATION OF MAGI

The moment in the story of Christ that these patrician bankers identified with was the Adoration of the Magi – the wise and wealthy pay homage to the baby Jesus. And this is the image that Fra Angelico painted inside Cosimo's cell.
Thirty years later Botticelli painted the same scene for the same patrons. But now the powerful patrician families have taken over the religious stage. Cosimo the Elder is portrayed kneeling before the Madonna while his grandson, Lorenzo the Magnificent swaggers on one side. Every face in this painting is a portrait from the Medici court circle - including Botticelli himself.

In another Botticelli portrait, a medallion of Cosimo the Elder is held by a fashionable young man. Botticelli's painting epitomises the shift in patronage during the second part of the 15th Century - away from the world of public competition into the private space of the Florentine palazzo.

The patrician families of Florence erected monuments to their own prestige in the Palazzi of the 15th Century. Palazzo Rucellai by the architect Alberti was admired for its classical detail and the elegance of its proportions.
More magnificent was the palace designed for Cosimo de Medici. This was not simply a home but the centre of a vast banking empire. Massive doors and rough rusticated masonry on the ground floor, increasingly smoother stonework above created a style that was to be imitated by palaces and banks in Europe and America for the next five hundred years.

The Medici created an elegant society where artists and scholars studied astrology and mythology, reviving antiquity for their private pleasure.

Cosimo commissioned the humanist Ficino to translate the works of Plato, and out of this intellectual climate came Botticelli's paintings, combining the sensuality of pagan mythology with themes and images from Christian art.

In his painting of the 'Primavera' - Zephyrus the wind god enters the scene and seizes the wood nymph Chloris whose mouth issues flowers as she is transformed into Flora, the goddess of Spring. In the centre stands a figure who resembles
both the Christian Madonna and Venus, the goddess of Love, and who directs the dance of the three graces.

BOTTICELLI: BIRTH OF VENUS

Naked Venus - seen here in Botticelli's 'The Birth of Venus' - symbolised divine love.

This nude figure, which also suggests a Baptism and a re-birth, is based upon classical forms which Botticelli has radically remodelled.

DONATELLO: DAVID (JOHN WHITE VOICE-OVER)

In Renaissance Florence, the nude, again became the focus of artistic efforts.

Donatello's David, probably commissioned by the Medici, with its obvious reflection of the Roman past, is a masterpiece of technical virtuosity and erotic suggestion.

But it was more than that. It was also a brilliantly inventive symbol of the Christian faithful, armoured only in the word of God.

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Finally, in Brunelleschi's church of San Lorenzo we find the two bronze pulpits that Donatello left unfinished at his death in 1466.

Here for the first time in Western Art we find a true late style that leads on to the work of Titian and of Rembrandt.

Leaving behind the technical perfection of his early work, Donatello now engages with his material in a rougher, more direct manner, biting into the bronze with his chisel to convey a more emotionally charged message.

Here in the harrowing of Hell, Christ's urgent figure reaches through the crowding souls to seize the arm of Abraham, and pull him to salvation.

And when Christ's heavy figure surges from the tomb, it is not a joyous Resurrection but a battle won against the odds.
Below the soldiers sleep as the old order passes. Christ's face seems burdened with the sins of all mankind as he climbs up from darkness into the light.

The fleeing devil of the harrowing has become a scorpion on a Roman shield.

Then finally the drama of salvation is resolved as the ascending Christ looks down in love and takes His leave of His apostles.

Looking over the rooftops and domes of the city, we can try to take an overview of that extraordinary period of artistic outpouring. It was after all a city whose population never even reached 100,000, continually riven by faction and strife, and yet which produced some of the greatest figures in the history of Western culture, from Giotto and Dante to Michelangelo and Leonardo. It was, for example, a Florentine, Amerigo Vespucci, with Florentine maps and instruments, who named the continent discovered by Columbus. The founder of modern science, Galileo, worked
in this city. With all of them it is the freshness of their thought, their willingness to experiment, their modernity, which impresses us today.

But there is another side to the story. Civilised human life depends not only on modernity but on a healthy assimilation of the past, both critical and imaginative. The Middle Ages had proved incapable of doing that, but here, in the Florentine Renaissance, we can see the re-integration of the Classical world view into modern life. Not merely their learning, but their pagan humanism, and their pantheism, with its incomparably rich mythological themes, which as we now understand contain such profound psychological insights.

What we see here in Florence is what they made of that tradition, just as this is what we are making of them. But its continued re-interpretation is a necessity for the West if it is to understand its own cultural tradition.

* E N D S *
TRES RICHES HEURES DU
DUC DE BERRY

The art of Renaissance Florence came out of the city-states of Central Italy. By contrast, our story of art in Northern Europe begins in the late mediaeval courts of France.

It was a time of violent contrasts: in the luxury of the court the Duke enjoys his banquet while the peasants shelter from the snow. In their nvel they bare themselves by the fire.

These illuminations were painted around 1414 by three brothers from the Netherlands, the Limbourgs, at the French court of the Duke of Berry.

The detailed realism of these faces and landscapes was to be a key feature of Northern art in this period.

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The Limbourg Brothers began their career working for the brother of the Duke of Berry: Philip the Bold, Duke of Burgundy.

The Valois dukes of Burgundy established one of the strangest and most extravagant courts of late mediaeval Europe.

From their base in Burgundy, by marriage and diplomacy, they acquired large areas of the Netherlands to build an extensive though fragmented state of vast wealth.

In 1404, Duke Philip the Bold died at the Stag Inn near Bruxelles.

Twenty years earlier, his royal sculptors had begun work on Philip's tomb. One of them carved these images of the funeral procession which transported his body back to Burgundy.
Clothed in the habit of a Carthusian monk, Philip's embalmed body was sealed in a great lead coffin and then carried in a funeral cortege which took nearly seven weeks to wind the 250 miles from Brussels to Dijon. Accompanied by his sons, his chaplains and members of his royal court, the hearse was drawn by six horses, caparisoned in black, with the blue banners of Burgundy fluttering at its corners.

At Dijon it was received not only by the weeping clergy, but by a hundred chosen townspeople, and a hundred poor, also clad in black at the Duke's expense.

And so, as with the other great royal and ducal rituals of the later Middle Ages, death itself could be turned into an act of public theatre.

Philip's tomb itself lay just outside Dijon, at the Carthusian monastery of Champmol. It took nearly thirty years to complete, and was finished after his death in 1414. Three sculptors worked on it,
but among them was a forgotten genius of European art, the man who conceived this remarkable evocation of that funeral procession - Claus Sluter.

He came from Harlem in the Netherlands and worked for the Duke of Burgundy for twenty years in Dijon.

Sluter's most impressive carving was a life-size monument known as the Well of Moses with prophets from the Old Testament around its base.

The Well was placed at the centre of the monastery of Champmol, where the Dukes of Burgundy were buried.

In Italy, Donatello was only ten years old when Sluter began to carve these figures which display an intense realism never seen before in European sculpture.

As this reconstructed model shows, The Well of Moses was originally brilliantly painted. The prophets
deliver their prophecies like figures from a mediaeval mystery play. The whole piece was intensely theatrical, linking the prophecies of the Old Testament to the sacrifice of Christ on the cross and originally the Well was surmounted by a lifesized Crucifixion group.

This Crucifix was smashed to pieces during the French Revolution, and the largest fragment that remains is the head of Christ.

Somehow Sluter's carving conveys both the agony of Christ on the Cross, and the release from suffering which death has brought.

Life at the Burgundian court was not always dominated by thoughts of God and death.

The Dukes of Burgundy were famous for their tournaments, their banquets, and their extravagance.

They placed great importance on all the arts so their court could be seen and heard as one of the grandest in Europe.
Because this was a travelling court, moving between the palaces of their scattered duchy, many of their artistic treasures were portable: tapestries, metal work, and illuminated manuscripts.

All this mediaeval extravagance was principally paid for by the Burgundian Netherlands: the most highly urbanised area of Europe.

MAP

During the 15th Century, Bruges became the busiest port in Northern Europe, while Brussels and Ghent became two of its largest industrial cities.

CAMPIN: SALTING
MADONNA

We can catch a realistic glimpse of Flemish urban life through the window of religious paintings, such as this Madonna by Robert Campin.

CRIVELLI: ANNUNCIATION

In Italy, fifteenth century artists used perspective and the study of antiquity to depict a suitable setting for their religious paintings.
By contrast, a Northern painter such as Campin in his Merode Altarpiece, saw no great divide between the distant past and the present, between the look of antiquity and the late medieval world.

Joseph in his carpenter's workshop is depicted with detailed realism - both the tools of his trade and the townscape visible through the window.

One sign of the success of Bruges as a trading centre was its wealthy community of Italian merchants and bankers. Out of this community came the most famous wedding portrait of Western art.

Here, in 1434, Jan van Eyck shows Giovanni Arnolfini: a hugely wealthy Italian moneylender and tapestry dealer to Duke Philip the Good of Burgundy. He is about to marry an equally wealthy young Italian, Giovanna Cenami, whose family lived in France. And here you see the shifty rabbity banker - one hand raised and the other joined to that of his new bride.
The artist proclaims his witnessing presence in a bold Gothic legal inscription in Latin. This reads: Jan van Eyck was here.

While Italians were developing their illusionistic art with the assistance of mathematically reasoned perspective, northern painters led by Jan van Eyck used many translucent layers of pigments in quick drying oils to produce uniquely convincing pictorialism.

Among Jan's most compelling portraits, this man's features may be the artist's own. They have some of that fixed almost hypnotic quality that sometimes results from staring into a mirror for self portrayal. We also know that artists in the 15th century often wore such flamboyant red turbans, which is another reason for suspecting that the identity of the sitter is Jan van Eyck himself.

The most famous European painter of his day, Jan van Eyck was also a diplomat, mapmaker and chemist. Enormously learned, he was concerned with Latin and Greek and studied Hebrew mysticism.
Here Jan van Eyck depicts the most figure at the Burgundian court - Chancellor Rolin kneeling before the Madonna.

In such works a saint usually presented the donor - the person paying for the painting - to the Virgin and Child.

But Rolin decided to appear before the Madonna without benefit of introduction.

So van Eyck linked the figures with Romanesque architecture and a view of the heavenly city and landscape beyond, realised by the almost magical glow of the oil medium.

Nicolas Rolin was the Chief Minister of Duke Philip the Good of Burgundy for nearly forty years.

He became one of the wealthiest and most powerful men in Europe, and at the height of his career he made a spectacular donation to charity.
The Hôtel Dieu, or God's Hostel, a hospital for the poor was founded by Chancellor Rolin in Beaune, close to the Duke's capital at Dijon.

The initials of Nicolas Rolin, and of his wife, Guigone de Salins, and their coats of arms appear in the stained glass and the floor tiles of the buildings, making it clear that the Hospital was a gigantic memorial to the donors.

"On this Sunday, the 4th of August 1443, neglecting all human cares and in the interest of my salvation, in recognition of the goodness of our Saviour from whom all benefits proceed, I found and donate irrevocably in the town of Beaune a hospital for the poor and the sick."

Such acts of piety were often performed by the rich in the Middle Ages for the good of their souls, but seldom on this massive scale. In this case, contemporaries viewed Rolin's wealth with hatred, and his professions of charity and spirituality with cynicism. And it's one of the mysteries of the time that such men seemed to combine an austere, rigid piety with
excesses of cruelty, of calculating greed and of, to us, sickening ostentation. King Louis XI himself said of Rolin: "He made enough people poor to make a paupers hospital necessary". And the hospital was where the poor came to die. Here in the Middle Ages were two rows of 31 beds where the poor lay two or three to a bed.

The 15th Century was a time of terrible famine, war and plague, and in a bad year thousands of people could die in a place like this. And so, thoughtfully, the Chancellor had provided that each of his patients could look from his or her bed to the wall above the high altar, where there hung a tremendous vision of the end: the Last Judgement of Rogier van der Weyden.

VAN DER WEYDEN: LAST JUDGEMENT

On the day of Judgement, the dead rise from the earth to be judged by their Saviour.

Christ sits enthroned in glory above the archangel Michael who holds the scales which will weigh the vices and virtues of all who are to be judged on the day of reckoning. St. John the Baptist, Mary, the twelve
Apostles, and other holy figures intercede on behalf of the sinners, and the lucky few are ushered through a bland Gothic gateway into the Kingdom of Heaven.

This painting was done with bright colours so that it could be seen by the sick even from their death beds.

Van Der Weyden excelled at depicting the inner emotions of his characters, and on Christ's left we see the damned - in a state of frenzy - drawn inexorably towards the flames of Hell.

There are no demons to drag them down.

In the words of a local theologian, "The weight of sin upon the conscience is sufficient to make the damned fall into Hell, as heavy as lead."

As the year 1500 approached, many were convinced they were living through the last days of mankind.
While the Turks threatened Christendom from the outside, Europe was tormented by political and religious tensions.

In the Netherlands, Hieronymus Bosch painted this strange vision of Hell composed of images suggesting the psychological disintegration of the late mediaeval world and the tensions of his time: industrial furnaces, armies on the march and artillery bombardments at night.

DÜRER: APOCALYPSE

The German printmaker who took the Apocalypse - as described in the Revelation of St. John the Divine - and transformed it into his own pictorial territory was Albrecht Dürer: the first major artist to publish his work in the form of a book.

COLIN EISLER PIECE TO CAMERA: DÜRER'S APOCALYPSE

Dürer exploited contemporary interest in the Revelations of St. John by designing and carving fifteen woodcut block prints, which reduced the twenty-two chapters of St. John's text into an extraordinary action-packed visual adventure which swept Western Europe. It made him the most famous graphic artist of his day, and the
series itself was of enduring fame, used by artists, sculptors, painters, graphic designers for the next 500 years.

Albrecht Dürer was clearly a precocious artist.

He was the son of a Nuremberg goldsmith and drew this portrait of himself at the age of thirteen.

He became the first artist in Western art to make a detailed series of self portraits throughout his life, analysing his changes of mood and image.

Dürer studied nature with the same incisive vision with which he analysed himself.

He was one of the first artists to go into the open to paint water colours from direct observation.

Dürer wrote "We German artists have grown up like wild trees in the forest, knowing nothing of the rules of proportion and perspective".
These watercolours were painted while Dürer was travelling from Nuremberg to Venice.

He wished to learn from Italian art and to have his own status as an artist acknowledged in the land of the Renaissance.

Venetian paintings from around 1500 show the city that Dürer visited: the wealthiest trading centre in Europe.

Giovanni Bellini, who painted this portrait of the Doge of Venice, was described by Dürer as "very old but still the best of the Venetian painters".

The young German was gratified that this Italian master should ask him for one of his works.

Bellini and his contemporaries had been influenced by Northern art: its realism, its sensitivity to light and landscape. And Bellini had become a master of the Northern technique of oil painting.
In his depiction of St. Francis, the whole landscape seems to convey the ecstasy of the saint's vision.

After Dürer's second Venetian journey, he engraved some of his most intricate complex plates. In Knight, Death and the Devil, the artist takes the equestrian statue he had seen in Italy and rides it into a northern forest. Here is the man of action, the warrior, blind to the perils that surrounded him, death at his side, the devil and devastation in his wake.

Dürer's radiant engraving of St. Jerome is a hymn to the contemplative life, showing his favourite saint in sacred study. Subtlety of light and the detailed depiction of the interior all recall van Eyck's art.

For his figure of brooding melancholy, Dürer may have used a Michelangelo sybil as his model. Melancholy is the dark side of genius, the discarded tools - a plane and saw, instruments and inkwell - all convey the frustrated artist, his creativity blocked.
Albrecht Dürer was a Northern genius who succeeded in assimilating the lessons of the South.

The last and boldest statement of Northern religious art can be found in the Isenheim Altarpiece, the work of a German master.

This massive altar in three stages is by the artist we know as Matthias Grünewald. In many ways it is the ultimate painting in Christian art. Never again would a painter feel quite so free to express the mysteries of Christian faith, ranging from agony to ecstasy.

This altarpiece was painted around 1515 for an Antonite monastery which specialised in the care of skin diseases.

The crucifixion is shown with unprecedented impact in horrific immediacy, like a monstrous affliction - the last work in Teutonic torture. Mary swoons in the arms of St. John the Evangelist, as the kneeling Magdalen twists her hands in impotent grief.
In the wings, two healing saints, Sebastian and Anthony, stand like living statues.

Because the panels of this altarpiece had to be separated, we need to look at a model to understand how it unfolded.

Mary reads the prophecy of Isiah: Behold, a virgin shall conceive, as she is interrupted by the archangel Gabriel's annunciation.

An angelic orchestra in the temple of Solomon celebrates this mystical union of heaven and earth by its harmonious celestial music. These happy sounds may also refer to musical therapy practised in mediaeval hospitals.

Shown as if defined by light alone, this is the most convincing Resurrection ever painted. Prophet of the atomic age, Grünewald conveys a sense of weightlessness as Christ rises.
MODEL

For the final opening, painted wings contrast with the sculpted centrepiece. St. Anthony is enthroned in triumph at the centre, and shown again at the left, meeting St. Paul the Hermit in his forest retreat.

PAUL THE HERMIT

TEMPTATION OF ST. ANTHONY

For this scene of St. Anthony's torment and trial in the wilderness, the artist brings back all the irrational, the images of monsters that he saw in mediaeval art and that of the 15th Century. He gives them an amazing quality and reality, a sense of immediacy. Half human, a fearfully diseased demon clutches his prayer book in a bag. An inscription in the corner could apply to him as well as to the patients at the hospital of St. Anthony: Where you are, good Jesus, where are you? Why haven't you come to heal my wounds.

C.U. ROMAN SOLDIER FROM ASCENSION PANEL

New classical idealism from Renaissance Italy ended the spontaneous realism and imagination of Grünewald's art. Two new views of Christianity also finished the free enquiry found in his painting - both Protestantism and Catholicism

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had their own rigorous ideas of just how religious subjects ought to be shown, and these rather narrow concepts really ended the wild fantasies, the quality of individuality which is so extraordinarily powerful in the monument that we have just seen.

Five years after Grünewald painted the Isenheim Altarpiece, Albrecht Dürer made the last of his journeys, not southwards to Italy this time but westwards to the Netherlands, to Brussels and to Antwerp.

And there comes one of those electric moments when the life of art and the current of history come together. For there Dürer was astonished by the beauty of looted Aztec gold which had been unloaded in ships from Mexico. Wonderful works of art, he called them, the like of which he had never seen in his life.
It was also a vision of the future for the centre of gravity of the west was beginning to shift from the Mediterranean to the western seaboard and to towns like Antwerp and London which would finance the domination of the west up to the present day.

But that domination lay in the future. In the story of art the powerhouse was still Italy and the time of Dürer in the north was in the south the time of Michelangelo, and in Rome the Renaissance was about to reach its climax.