Italian masters: educational project

Museum of Modern Art

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The Museum of Modern Art's exhibition history—from our founding in 1929 to the present—is available online. It includes exhibition catalogues, primary documents, installation views, and an index of participating artists.
Michelangelo, Raphael, Titian died four hundred years ago in Italy but their names are known today to millions of Americans. Through their painting and sculpture these artists are still so much alive that the Museum of Modern Art is delighted to be able to show their work, even though the Museum is first of all interested in the arts of our own time—houses, furniture, movies, photographs, as well as painting and sculpture. An exhibition of “Modern Masters” is in fact being shown on another floor of the Museum at the same time as the Italian Masters, while movies of historic importance are shown in the auditorium.

Next to this column is an historical chart showing where and when the artists in the exhibition lived and how the older artists passed on their ideas to their followers so that traditions were formed which have come right down through the years to us today. For instance, Picasso, the most famous living artist, was influenced by Ingres, Ingres by Raphael, (no. xx in “Italian Masters”), Raphael by Leonardo da Vinci, Leonardo by Verrocchio, (no. xx), and Verrocchio by Donatello (no. xx).

In the EARLY RENAISSANCE, about 1400 to 1500, artists were excited by new scientific researches in anatomy and movement (Pollaiuolo, Verrocchio), the expression of character (Donatello), of drama (Masaccio), detailed realism (the landscape in Mantegna’s St. George). They were also deeply interested in new discoveries in Greek and Roman art and legend (Pollaiuolo, Botticelli).

During the HIGH RENAISSANCE, about 1510, detailed realism and youthful enthusiasm gave way to a new sense of maturity and grandeur such as we find in the work of Michelangelo, Raphael, Titian and Palma Vecchio. But the classic dignity, self-confidence and perfection of the High Renaissance “Grand Style” soon lost its balance and fell to pieces in a number of interesting ways which, taken together, are called MANNERISM. The intimate portraits of Lotto and Parmigianino, the elongated and twisted figures of Tintoretto show two very different aspects of Mannerist art.

A little before 1600 Caravaggio staged a one-man revolution in painting. He was hardboiled both in his art and his life. He painted sensationaly realistic pictures with melodramatic lighting and pretended to despise the classic art of both the Greeks and the Renaissance. He was the first great painter of the BAROQUE period, 1600-1750, and greatly influenced the Italians, Cavallino, Guercino, Gentileschi, (nos. xx, xx, xx) as well as far more famous foreign artists such as Rubens, Rembrandt and Velasquez. The foremost Baroque sculptor was the Italian Bernini (no. xx).

Italian Baroque Art died out in the 18th century but the great Italian traditions are carried on today by many of the best living artists, both European and American.
I archive deep Christian piety. Underneath these outward forms lay the artist's Gothic (in style, but the perspective of the colors, the graceful trailing robes, the doll cover of Catalog. The gay flower garden JOHN THE BAPTIST. Painted about 1430. Panel, 10 3/8 x 9 7/8 inches. Color plate on Florentine, 1387-1455. THE NAMING OF

2. FRA ANGELICO

The Renaissance. He was the first great painter of the BAROQUE period, 1600-1750, as well as far more famous foreign artists such as Rubens, Rembrandt and Velasquez.

During the HIGH RENAISSANCE, about 1610, detailed realism and youthful enthusiasm gave way to a new sense of maturity and grandeur such as we find in the work of Michelangelo, Raphael, Titian and Poussin. But the classic dignity, self-confidence and perfection of the High Renaissance "Grand Style" soon lost its balance and fell to pieces in a number of interesting ways which, taken together, are called MANNERISM. The intense portraits of Lotto and Parmigianino, the elongated and twisted figures of Tintoretto show two very different aspects of Mannerist art.

A little before 1610 Caravaggio initiated a new revolution in painting. He handled both his art and his life, he painted sensationally realistic pictures with melodramatic lighting and pretended to dislike the classic art of both the Greeks and the Renaissance. He was the first great painter of the BAROQUE period, 1600-1750, and greatly influenced the Italians, Corravaggio, Guercino, Gentileschi, etc., etc., as well as far more famous foreign artists such as Rubens, Rembrandt and Velazquez.

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ITALIAN MASTERS

3. MASACCIO

(Unauthorized). Florentine, 1401-1428. THE CRUCIFIXION. Painted in 1427. Panel 13 3/8 x 21 3/8 inches. Dramatic pathos in the poses and gestures of the figures. Symbolical composition. Powerful poses and strong dramatic light. The circle and the soft curves within it are stabilized by the strong verticals of the chair and back of Madonna. Compare with Michelangelo's circular Madonna in marble. Study the differences in spirit and feeling as well as in composition. Which do you prefer?

4. POLLAIUOLO

(see page 3). Florentine, 1441-1498. HERCULES AND ANTAEUS. Made about 1486 (?). Bronze, height 17 1/2 inches. The two bent back bodies are held together by a new scientific period. This panel was in Massachusetts. Florentine, 1401-1429. THE CRUCIFIXION. Florentine, 1475-1564. MADONNA AND CHILD. Made about 1504. Circular marble relief, 38 1/2 inches in diameter. Mother and child roughly compose a pyramid within a circle. Sharp angles of seated body, elbow and knee contrast with surrounding curves of the drapery and child's body. Compare with softly rounding forms of Raphael's Madonna of the Chair. Compare, too, the roundness and pride of Michelangelo's Madonnas with Raphael's obvious sweetness. The surface is completely finished, and you can see the marks of the chisel: do you think this spoils the beauty of the work?
5. VERROCCHIO


Birth: 1435. Height: 136 inches. An elegant group of body, subtle expression of face, faultless modeling of detail figures. Compare the David with Mantegna's St. George: both works were influenced by the great Donatello. At the time the David was made Leonardo da Vinci was probably an assistant in Verrocchio's studio.

6. LAURANA


Made about 1493. Marble, height: 17 inches. Underlying globular form of the head emphasized by the dark softness contrasted with the distinctly delineated features and delicately rendered textures of gown and cap. Apparent simplicity of technique adds to the strange charm of the face. Compare with Donatello's Young Man in technique and feeling. Which do you like more?

7. BOTTICELLI

(Bartolomeo). Venus, 1484-1485. Birth of Venus. Painted about 1485-1490. Tempera on canvas, 66 1/2 x 52 1/2 inches. Delicately poetic, sensuously reflected in the glowing face and the soft play of the glistening waves. Trees and waves treated schematically. Rhythms of figures and drapery move in toward the central figure. A supreme masterpiece of sculpture. (There are large details and the head of Venus is color in the Catalog.)

8. ANDREA DELLA ROBBIA

(Florentine). The Annunciation. Birth of Venus.

Height: 18 inches. An elegant group of body, subtle expression of face, faultless modeling of detail figures. Compare the David with Mantegna's St. George: both works were influenced by the great Donatello. At the time the David was made Leonardo da Vinci was probably an assistant in Verrocchio's studio.

10. GIOVANNI BELLINI


12. GIOVANNI BELLINI


16. CARAVAGGIO

(Cornelius, 1571-1610). Boy Bitten by a Lizard.

Painted about 1593. Oil on canvas. 25 1/2 x 20 inches. Vivid detail and active sense of life, theatrical lighting, breadth and vigor of the forms are all characteristic of Caravaggio's aggressive naturalism.

17. PALMA VECCHIO

(Andrea, 1508-1588). Portrait of Pope Paul III. Painted about 1546. Oil on canvas. 49 1/2 x 33 inches. Vivid portrait, expressing the electric vitality and passion of the artist. Flamboyant design in arrangement of hair and folds of dress; face full of contrasting tones of golden brown and blue. Dramatic lighting, pose and gestures typical of Baroque emotionalism.

18. CARAVAGGIO


Painted about 1593. Oil on canvas. 25 1/2 x 20 inches. Vivid detail and active sense of life, theatrical lighting, breadth and vigor of the forms are all characteristic of Caravaggio's aggressive naturalism.

20. TIEPOLO

(Venetian, 1696-1770). A Council of the Knights of Malta, 1748. Oil, 120 x 193 inches. One of the great portraits of the world. Marvelous characterization of head and hands. Expert painting, especially in the white sleeve and red velvet chair arm.