The Early Renaissance in Northern Italy

Throughout the Renaissance, the Italian peninsula was a shifting mosaic of small states, divided by politics and geography. Painting, naturally, reflected regional differences. Artists who trained in local workshops helped retain traditional styles, but other forces, including travel and changing tastes, influenced them in new ways.

The works in this room were painted by artists from three northern cities: Padua, Ferrara, and Venice. In the early 1400s Padua was an important university and humanist center. Commissions there attracted several artists from Florence, whose works introduced Renaissance innovations to northern Italy. Perhaps the most influential was a series of bronze reliefs by Donatello, completed in 1453. His use of perspective and overlapping planes to create the illusion of depth must have been a revelation to artists accustomed to the decorative but essentially flat style of late Gothic art. Andrea Mantegna, who probably saw Donatello's work in progress, adopted the orderly, readable space to unify multipanel altarpieces with a single continuous background. And in an influential series of frescoes, he enhanced the viewer's sense of sharing the picture space by dramatically foreshortening figures and projecting them over the frame. A member of humanist circles, he made a careful study of ancient art and architecture. Not only did Mantegna pose his figures like statues, he also gave them a stony coolness.

Mantegna's hard surfaces and tense lines influenced, in turn, artists from nearby Ferrara, where the demands of a sophisticated court fueled a distinctive and elegantly artificial style. Venetian artists also worked in Padua, which had been under Venetian control since 1405. Among them was Jacopo Bellini, whose daughter Mantegna married. Jacopo began to treat his picture space not simply as a surface to be decorated but, as Florentine theorists urged, like a window for the viewer.

Giovanni d'Alemagna
Venetian, active 1441–1450

Saint Apollonia Destroys a Pagan Idol, about 1442/1445

Apollonia was sentenced to torture by her father for destroying a pagan idol. Her teeth were pulled from her mouth and her eyes put out. She was dragged through the streets by a horse. Here the story begins as the saint, young and beautiful, steadfastly mounts a ladder, armed with a mallet and firm resolve.

This panel, originally from an altarpiece, shares the colorful and decorative style of late Gothic art. It probably had an even stronger Gothic feel before its pointed arch was modified. Nevertheless, Giovanni, like Jacopo Bellini (next entry), was a part of the Venetian avant-garde beginning to explore the innovations of Renaissance painting. Here he responds to the growing taste for ancient architecture and decoration with the nude statue and such classical elements as the leafy balcony brackets and arched doorway. He also reveals his interest—if not complete success—in representing three-dimensional space. Figures and architecture draw the eye into the distance, yet the painter's understanding of perspective is more intuitive than scientific. The space is too crowded to provide much depth, and our vantage point is too high.

Tempera on panel, 59.4 x 34.7 cm (23 3/8 x 13 11/16 in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1939.1.7

Jacopo Bellini
Venetian, about 1390/1400–1470/1471

Saint Anthony Abbot and Saint Bernardino of Siena, 1459

Though his sketchbooks are full of experiments with perspective and classical motifs, Jacopo's other surviving paintings retain the decorative and refined look of late Gothic art. This panel, however, which was only recently identified, suggests that Jacopo had a greater role in bringing Renaissance innovations to Venice than previously believed.

Saints Anthony and Bernardino stand before a landscape that extends into the distance. The pink object behind Bernardino may be a sarcophagus lid—it would connect this panel, which was probably the left side of an altarpiece, with the central scene, perhaps of the Resurrection. The background has become a single unified space, such as the viewer might glimpse through a window. The shape of the panel is also new: instead of a pointed gable, the frame has the rounded arch of classical architecture.

At the time this was painted, Jacopo's workshop included his sons Gentile and Giovanni. All three signed the altarpiece, but Jacopo was clearly responsible for the design and probably painted this work entirely by himself. His sons may have contributed other panels now missing.

Tempera on panel, 110 x 57 cm (43 5/16 x 22 7/16 in.)
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Andrea Mantegna or Follower (Possibly Giulio Campagnola)
Paduan, about 1431–1506;
Venetian, 1482–after 1514

Judith with the Head of Holofernes, about 1495/1500

The story of Judith comes from Old Testament Apocrypha. The beautiful Jewish widow seduced Holofernes, the general of an attacking Assyrian army. As Holofernes lay in a drunken stupor, she severed his head with two blows from his own sword. The leaderless Assyrians were then defeated by the Israelites. Images of Judith, like those of David triumphing over Goliath, were popular in Renaissance Italy, where many small states hoped to find parallels in the defeat of a larger and more powerful enemy. Judith was also frequently included in cycles of illustrious women.

This painting was a treasured possession. Small and brilliant with color, it has the jewellike quality of manuscript illumination. It may have been intended to be set in a carved box. Silver highlights give Judith's robe a rich sheen, and the bedpost is detailed with gold. Paint is applied with delicate, parallel brushstrokes.

Attribution of the painting to Mantegna has long been debated by scholars. Judith's pose and the coolness of her skin have the look of ancient sculpture—and it was sometimes said that Mantegna's figures more closely resembled marble than flesh. On the other hand, the painting's delicacy and minute style, and the heroine's lack of forceful expression or movement may point to another artist's hand.

Tempera on panel, 30.1 x 18.1 cm (11 3/16 x 7 1/8 in.)
Widener Collection 1942.9.42

Cosmè Tura
Ferrarese, about 1433–1495
Madonna and Child in a Garden, about 1460/1470

Complex allegories were popular with the sophisticated court in Ferrara. Cosmè Tura's complicated subjects, as well as his exaggerated style—notice the Virgin's long fingers, for example—appealed to an audience attuned to artifice, and by 1451 he was drawing a salary from Ferrara's ruling duke, Borso d'Este.

The picture is layered with symbolism, which would have been apparent to contemporary viewers. Images of Jesus sleeping in his mother's lap were meant to prefigure his sacrifice. Here, his feet are crossed as at the Crucifixion. Tura also references Jesus' birth, thus encompassing in this one small panel the history of man's salvation. The small figures in the roundels enact the Annunciation. The unusual slit in the red garment along the Virgin's abdomen and the position of the child between her knees underscore this allusion to Christ's birth. In other paintings Tura made his intention clear with inscriptions that exhort the Virgin to wake up her child—to get him born into the world—so he can get on with the business of salvation.

Tura seems to have intended this image to appear old-fashioned. The raised gold tendrils, especially, hark back to late Gothic painting, and the vague floral background is unlike the artist's typically parched, lunar-looking landscapes (compare his Annunciation panels in this room).

Tempera and oil on panel, 53.4 x 37.2 cm (21 x 14 ⅝ in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1952.5.29

Francesco del Cossa
Ferrarese, about 1436–1477/1478
Saint Florian, about 1473/1474

This painting, Saint Lucy, and the round *Crucifixion* (also on this wall), all came from the same altarpiece. A sketch, made in the eighteenth century, shows the original arrangement of the panels and the elaborately carved frame that surrounded them.

The gold backgrounds, the division of the altarpiece into discrete compartments, and the Gothic frame would have been quite conservative in the 1470s, when this altarpiece was commissioned. Cossa's compositions, however, are innovative and up-to-date. Lucy and Florian were both meant to be seen from below, and they appear to lean out over their parapets, looming into the space above the viewer's head. Florian's booted foot is perched dramatically over the edge. We know nothing about Francesco del Cossa's training—he came from a family of stone masons—but the sharp projections, hard lines, and dramatic foreshortening are all indications of the strong influence that Mantegna's linear style exerted in Ferrara.

The altarpiece was painted for a family chapel in Bologna. The two saints here were the name saints of Floriano Griffoni, who commissioned it, and his first wife, Lucia. Florian was a military saint, Lucy a virgin who plucked her eyes from their sockets and offered them to a suitor tormented by their beauty (they were later miraculously restored). Probably Cossa's petallike arrangement of Lucy's eyes is a play on the name Floriano and the Latin word (*flor*) for flower.

Tempera on panel, 79.4 x 55 cm (31 ¼ x 21 ⅝ in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1939.1.227

Carlo Crivelli
Venetian, about 1430/1435–1495
Madonna and Child Enthroned with Donor, 1470

Carlo Crivelli was born in Venice, but much of his inspiration, if not his training, seems to have come from Padua. Although he often signed himself "Venetus," almost all his work was done elsewhere. The only record of him in Venice is a court document—he was sentenced to six months in prison for living with the wife of an absent sailor. After his release he moved to the Dalmatian coast, and later immigrated to the Marches region of Italy. In that isolated area, his style—rapidly becoming somewhat old fashioned—continued to win the approval of conservative patrons and evolved very little.

This panel, a blend of Gothic and Renaissance sensibilities, was once at the center of an altarpiece in a church in the Marches. The raised and gilded details belong to an older, ornamental tradition. So does the decorative, calligraphic line of the Virgin's richly embroidered hem. The figures are chiseled by a hard line. They are convincingly posed but seem compressed in a too-small space. Surfaces are meticulously detailed, yet their metallic hardness works against the impression of reality. The resulting tension between the two- and three dimensional is seen also in the work of Ferrarese artists, leading some to suggest that Crivelli traveled to Ferrara, though he is not known to have ever left the Marches after 1468. Perhaps instead these similarities are explained by the shared influence of Paduan art on all.

Tempera on panel, 129.5 x 54.4 cm (51 x 21 ⁷⁄₁₆ in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1952.5.6

Ercole de' Roberti
Ferrarese, about 1455/1456–1496
The Wife of Hasdrubal and Her Children, about 1490/1493

Ercole de' Roberti, like Cosmè Tura before him, was appointed court artist to the duke of Ferrara. A court artist would paint official portraits—like those of Giovanni and Ginevra Bentivoglio in this room, for example—but much of Roberti's work was ephemeral. He was called on to create designs for silverware and furniture, painted scenes on chests and other household objects, decorations for parade banners and carriages, even coffins.

This panel was part of a set Roberti painted, most likely for Duchess Eleonora d'Aragona, of illustrious women. The ancient Carthaginian Hasdrubal surrendered to Rome, but his wife, rather than accept slavery, killed their two sons and immolated herself. Here the children, not yet slaughtered, appear as if in a delicate dance, and only small flames emerge from the ruins around them. Yet the drama—and distress—is conveyed by her open mouth and the violent contrast of red and green.

In cycles dedicated to famous men and women of antiquity, women were normally celebrated for piety and chastity. Only in the later fifteenth century were they extolled for a more active physical and moral courage. Eleonora herself enjoyed wide fame among her contemporaries for her role in the politics of Ferrara and for her action during a threatened coup. She commissioned several treatises about famous women from humanist authors, some of which included her own biography as well.

Tempera on panel, 47.3 x 30.6 cm (18 ⅝ x 12 ¹⁄₁₆ in.)
Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund 1965.7.1

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The works of art discussed here are sometimes temporarily moved to other rooms or removed from display.

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