

1300 - 1453: “ARIA DA CAPO”

by John McKeefery

THE FALSE DAWN

In 1300, Pope Boniface proclaimed a Jubilee – and well he might. “Progress during two centuries had been constant. The land was dotted with new towns and cities, adorned with noble churches and filled with comfortable homes. Food was cheap and plentiful. Business was good; the long disaster of the crusades had ended and had been succeeded by a booming trade with the East. The bourgeoisie, increasingly prosperous, purchased estates, gained titles and married their daughters into the nobility. The peasants, borne on a rising tide of prosperity, were probably better off than they would be for centuries.” (1/331) The city of Florence had emerged as the leading financial and industrial center of Europe. Further, its prosperity produced an explosion of artistic genius in Tuscany, propelled by Giotto, Duccio, and Simone Martini.

Medieval art had been conceptual art. It was concerned to declare the lessons of the Biblical story and the glory of God, while displaying little sensitivity to the nuances of human experience. For example, it was quite comfortable depicting the Christ Child as a middle aged man, [[Plate A](#)] seated on what appears to be an icon and throne of wisdom, more than a woman and mother. The medieval artist would not hesitate to include several different scenes in a single picture leaving the viewer to follow the complex and confusing narrative of a story already known and frequently repeated. Unlike the approach to painting taken for granted before the eccentricities of the early twentieth century, medieval art did not attempt to create an illusion, on transparent canvas, of a unified scene viewed through a clear glass window.

The tradition of illusionist art began with Giotto in fourteenth century Florence. In his *Lamentation* [[Plate B](#)], we see something totally new – a unified dramatic scene with recognizable spatial relationships, solid human figures expressing shared human emotion in a dramatically organized depiction. This is not yet full realism, but it is closer than anything seen since antiquity. Giotto, the Florentine, is asserting the claim of perceptual reality even to the point of sacrificing the artistic grace that had characterized earlier painting. The Sieneese masters Duccio and Simone Martini were unwilling to make this sacrifice. They wanted to incorporate a degree of the new realism while retaining the graceful picture space of the Medieval and Byzantine tradition. A Simone Martini masterpiece depicting the Annunciation [[Plate C](#)] beautifully illustrates what such an approach

was able to achieve. Note the cunning way in which the artist fits the angel's wings into the shape of the frame, as well as the elegance with which he captures the shrinking reluctance of the Virgin, while using that very gesture to allow her to occupy what would otherwise have been an awkward space. Compare the almost willowy quality of the Simone Martini to the massive solidity of the Giotto.

The new way of depicting the Christian message was a reflection of the revolution in religious sensibility wrought by the life and preaching of Francis of Assisi. St. Francis was a gifted preacher who promulgated a Christianity drenched in the pathos of the baby Jesus whose awful destiny it was to suffer and die for our sins. Because this has been the central Christian message ever since, we tend to take it for granted. However, before St. Francis, the Christian narrative focused not on the loving sacrifice of the vulnerable baby Jesus and his sorrowful mother, but on a Christ who has transcended human suffering, and gazes down from the cross in serene triumph, divinely aloof from the follies and frailties of ordinary mortals.

St. Francis, who founded his monastery in 1209 with a group of companions vowing to devote their lives to humble simplicity and voluntary poverty, saw his order grow into a great institution. To avoid endangering his salvation by becoming an administrator, he relinquished control in 1220 and died at the age of forty-six, worn out by his austerities and apologizing to "brother ass," as he called his body, for having abused it so cruelly. Within two years he was canonized and his followers promptly built a costly and impressive basilica as a suitable memorial to his life of humble poverty. "Decorated by all the chief Italian painters of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, it became the richest and most evocative church in Italy – a strange memorial to the poor little man. But of course, St. Francis' cult of poverty could not survive him. It did not even last his lifetime, but was officially rejected by the Church, already part of the international banking system that had originated in thirteenth century Italy. Those of St. Francis' disciples, called Fraticelli, who clung to his doctrine of poverty were denounced as heretics and burned at the stake. (2/59ff.)

However, the very society that rejected the saint's message of poverty was happy to spend fortunes enshrining the Franciscan vision in art. In Franciscan places of worship, painters were encouraged to move their audiences as St. Francis had done. The new art of Giotto and those who followed, all of the technical inventions lovingly chronicled in art history books, were in the service of this new vision of the Christian narrative. No longer would the believer merely grasp the logos of the Christian message,

but would now empathically embrace the drama of salvation through divine suffering as a visible and present sacrament of the overflowing love of God for mankind – and they would do so, in no small measure, thanks to the profits of Florentine bankers. “The millennium will be inaugurated by the unselfishness of Undershaft and Bodger. Oh be joyful!” And so it ever was!

THE DARK NIGHT

If a visitor to an art museum were to casually wander through the galleries devoted to fourteenth and fifteenth Century Italian art, he would note that at the beginning of the fourteenth century artists such as Giotto, Duccio and Simone Martini exhibited a new freshness not present in the art of the Middle Ages. Knowing that this new departure would flourish in the art of Masaccio, Botticelli and Donatello and culminate in Leonardo, Raphael and Michelangelo, he might think that humanity was doing pretty well indeed. However, if he were particularly observant, he would note the gap of over sixty years between the death of Giotto and the birth of Masaccio, and wonder what had happened. What happened were war and plague: the Hundred Years War and the Black Death that carried off a third of the population of Europe. No wonder Barbara Tuchman called the fourteenth century “calamitous.” “Pessimism was a normal mood in the Middle Ages, because man was understood to be born doomed and in need of salvation, but it became more pervasive in the second half of the century” (3/245) – fully justified by feudal anarchy and The Hundred Years War, by the bubonic plague, and by the declining moral authority of the Church, in this period more a source of corruption and scandal than of spiritual comfort.

feudal anarchy and the hundred years war

In 1066, England was conquered by the Duke of Normandy who ruled England as William I. Matters were complicated by the fact that his liege lord was the king of France. Thus, the king of England was vassal to the French king. To make matters worse, by the fourteenth century, King Edward III of England had a reasonable claim to the French throne itself. Not surprisingly, this did not contribute to stability. Edward pressed his feudal claim and the resulting series of wars, fought intermittently between England and France from 1337 to 1453, is collectively known as The Hundred Years War.

Joan of Arc and Shakespeare notwithstanding, it was not valorous idealism that drove the combatants, but narcissism, brutality and greed. There were few great battles such as Agincourt and Poitiers, but lots of looting, cruelty and devastation. Soldiers went to war for ransom and booty, and just because it was “what they did.” Killing people was at least an escape from

the boredom of life in the castle.

Of course, “the age had long been accustomed to physical violence. In England, coroners’ rolls showed manslaughter far ahead of accidents as the cause of death. Violence was official as well as individual. Torture was authorized by the Church and regularly used to uncover heresy by the Inquisition. The tortures and punishments of civil justice customarily cut off hands and ears, [and] racked, burned, flayed, and pulled apart people’s bodies. Accustomed in their own lives to physical hardship and injury, medieval men and women were not necessarily repelled by the spectacle of pain, but rather enjoyed it.” (3/134f.). Further, the age was characterized by private wars among aristocrats, probably best understood as gang warfare among people who saw themselves as noble, but whom we would see as war lords or thugs. “These private wars were fought by the knights with a single strategy, which consists in trying to ruin the enemy by killing or maiming as many peasants and destroying as many crops, vineyards, tools, barns, and other possessions as possible, thereby reducing his sources of revenue. As a result, the chief victim of the belligerents was their respective peasantry.” (3/8).

It needs to be understood that when a king raised an army, he didn’t feel the obligation to pay salaries, or provision his army. Rather, the troops were expected to live off of the countryside – which meant that looting and pillaging were not seen as aberrations resulting from poor military discipline, but as the normal way in which wars were financed.

During intervals of peace, the armies didn’t exactly demobilize. They rather broke up into military gangs under the command of war lords – looting and renting themselves out as what were called “free companies.” The noble knight often became indistinguishable from an ordinary brigand. By the second half of the fourteenth century, such companies routinely sold their services to kings and dukes, and even to the pope himself. These rented troops, who lived mostly on the income from ransom and plunder, dominated military forces at a time when the state did not yet have the ability to raise and support a standing army.

In the conflict between the kings of England and France, the English won some early victories. Then an unstable peace lasted until Henry V decided to go “once more into the breach” at Agincourt, having renewed hostilities to press his claim to the French throne. Actually, he was quite successful. He concluded the Treaty of Troyes (1420) which named him regent of France, heir to the French throne and husband to Princess Catherine of France. He did marry Catherine, but then died of camp fever and never sat on the French throne. Nine years later, an hysterical adolescent named Joan

did her vision thing, raised the British siege of Orleans, and began the process that would see Charles VII crowned at Reims and the English driven from all of France except the port of Calais., just across the Channel.

Thus, in the end, an English attempt to gain the crown of France resulted in the loss of almost all of its possessions in France, while France itself was devastated economically. In the winter of 1438, wolves attacked women and children in the sparsely populated suburbs of Paris, and even entered the city itself. This sacrifice of the livelihood of peasants and pointless loss of life was in the service of the personal vanity of two feudal monarchies. In the course of the conflict, jingoistic instincts were ignited among the populace on both sides. This resulted in the birth of the sentiment of nationalism that we have, most unfortunately, taken for granted ever since. For the first time, the peasant identified himself as Frenchman or Englishman, rather than as the subject of whoever happened to be his feudal master. Ultimately, patriotic sentiments would make it more difficult to limit conflicts short of decisive victory and would lead to the phenomenon of total war in which mortality would be numbered in the millions.

Peasant revolts also contributed to the anarchy of the period. These were eruptions of violent and barbarous rage at the pain and injustice of their monotonous lives by people with no other outlet for their grievances. The revolts were crushed with ruthless barbarity. They were not revolutions because they were without realistic programs and stable political organization – just hopeless, short-lived expressions of despair which, like the politics of nihilism in our own time, seem to seek violence for its own sake as a necessary outlet for the torment of unexpressed rage.

In 1358, France, witnessed “the ferocious uprising of the peasantry called the Jacquerie. No plan of revolution, but simply hate ignited the Jacquerie. The nobles at the outset panicked and fled with their families to the walled towns, leaving their homes and all their goods. The Jacques continued killing and burning. A group of Jacquerie from Paris numbering some 9000 marched on Meaux where the royal family was residing. The Jacques were decisively defeated by a band of knights. Meux was the turning point. Gaining courage from the conquest, French nobles of the area joined in desolating the surrounding country. From there the suppression of the Jacquerie followed. The futile uprising lasted less than a month. Nothing had been gained, nothing changed, only more death. Like every insurrection of the century, it was smashed, as soon as the rulers recovered their nerve, by weight of steel and the advantage of the man on horseback.” (3/171ff.).

Futile revolts occurred across Western Europe. However, the Peasant's Revolt that broke out in England nearly succeeded in overpowering the government. "In June, 1381, three ragged armies converged on London, which fell easily. The invaders seized and beheaded the archbishop of Canterbury, the lord treasurer, and other officials. In the end, the rebellion rapidly disintegrated. John Ball and other leaders were executed. Amnesty was granted the followers on condition that they disband and return to their homes. The uprising followed the normal sequence: discontent; the appearance of compelling leaders to focus the discontent; an onrush to the seizure of power; brief, bloody, drunken domination; failure of constructive purpose; reaction of the conservative, propertied classes with their weapons and troops; and a white terror to match the red terror." (1/331ff.).

the black death

As if war and violence were not affliction enough, Europeans were to be visited with one of the greatest horrors of their history – a devastating series of outbreaks of bubonic plague. "In October, 1347, Genoese trading ships pulled into the harbor of Messina in Sicily with dead and dying men at the oars. This was the beginning of the plague. No one knows the final death toll for sure, but the usual estimate is a third of the population of Europe – about 20 million deaths. The plague was not the kind of calamity that inspired mutual help. Its loathsomeness and deadliness did not herd people together in mutual distress, but only prompted their desire to escape each other. Flight was the chief resource of those who could afford it. The rich fled to their country places like Boccaccio's young patricians who settled in a pastoral place 'removed on every side from the roads' with 'wells of cool water and vaults of rare wines.' That the poor were more heavily afflicted than the rich was clearly remarked at the time. The sense of a vanishing future created a kind of dementia of despair. Lawlessness and debauchery accompanied the plague. Ignorance of the cause augmented the sense of horror. Of the real carriers, rats and fleas, the fourteenth century had no suspicion, perhaps because they were so familiar. To the people at large there could be but one explanation – the wrath of God. Efforts to cope with the epidemic availed little, either in treatment or prevention." (3/92ff.).

They didn't have a solution – but the Jews, who were accused of poisoning the wells, served as a convenient scapegoat and were often lynched. The Jews had maintained a place in medieval society as essential money lenders, underwriting the warfare of kings. However, by the thirteenth century, as Europe became more prosperous, Jews found that they could not compete with Christian banking houses like the Bardi of Florence. No longer necessary, they were all the more expendable. "In Basle on January

9, 1349, the whole community of several hundred Jews was burned in a wooden house especially constructed for the purpose on an island in the Rhine, and a decree was passed that no Jew should be allowed to settle in Basle for 200 years. In Strasbourg the Town Council, which opposed persecution, was deposed by vote of the guilds and another one was elected, prepared to comply with the popular will. In February 1349, before the plague had reached the city, the Jews of Strasbourg, numbering 2,000, were taken to the burial ground, where all, except those who accepted conversion, were burned at rows of stakes erected to receive them. The Jews were slaughtered with a thoroughness that seemed to seek the final solution.” (3/92ff).

the decline of the church

In the violence and horror of the times, European man desperately needed the support of the spiritual authority of the Church. However, the Renaissance Church was noted more for greed and corruption than for succor and sanctity. The Church controlled a very considerable part of the wealth of Europe and was, in fact, the world’s largest business organization – one for which religious duties were a kind of sideline. Its business was in landed property, but also in the sale of ecclesiastical offices, as well as indulgences and other spiritual dispensations. Sellers of indulgences were as common then as stock brokers are today. The Church actually benefited financially from the plague while its moral authority declined. Scorn for the clergy was widespread. “In the tales of Boccaccio, in the fabliaux of France, in all popular literature of the time, clerical celibacy is a joke. Priests lived with mistresses or else went in hunt of them.” (3/31).

the great schism and avignon papacy

In Catholic mythology, popes are not selected as the outcome of a vulgar political struggle, but in humble submission to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. In the fourteenth century, these pious promptings were often difficult to discern in the behavior of the cardinals. For instance, in 1292, the cardinals were in such conflict that they split into factions that fought one another in the street. In 1305, King Philip of France engineered the election of Clement V who, in the midst of the Hundred Years War between England and France, chose to move the papacy to Avignon in his native France, thus insuring its impartiality. Pope Gregory XI returned to Rome in 1377, but died fifteen months later. In the conclave that ensued, the cardinals were divided between two French candidates for the papal throne. Finally, they settled on what they perceived to be a safe Italian candidate, a Neapolitan of low birth, who took the name of Urban VI. The announcement of the outcome of the papal election contained no suggestion that the election might be invalid because the cardinals had been

intimidated. Indeed, the cardinals acknowledged Urban as pope and pestered him with requests for ecclesiastical appointments for their relatives. It was business as usual until Urban, whom the cardinals had thought they could manage, became a threat to their power and prerogatives. It turns out that the grant of papal power “instantly went to Urban’s head. From a humble unspectacular official totally unprepared for the papal throne, he was transformed overnight into an implacable scourge of simony, moved less by religious zeal than by simple hatred and jealousy of privilege. He publicly chastised the cardinals for absenteeism, luxury and lascivious life, forbade them to hold or sell plural benefices, prohibited their acceptance of pensions, gifts of money, and other favors from secular sources. Worse, he ordered these princes of the Church to restrict their meals to one course. He berated them without tact or dignity, his face growing purple and his voice hoarse with rage. He interrupted them with rude invective and even tried to physically strike one of the cardinals. The feelings of the men who had raised Urban over their own heads probably cannot be described. Rages and insults might have been borne, but not interference with revenue and privilege. When Urban flatly refused to return to Avignon, the crisis came <and> the cardinals decided on the fatal course of removal. Since there was no procedure for ousting a pope for unfitness, their plan was to annul the election on grounds that it had been conducted under duress from mob violence. The cardinals elected a new Pope from among their number [who] returned with his cardinals to Avignon in April 1379. [Each] pope excommunicated the followers of the other. To keep each papacy from bankruptcy, simony redoubled, benefices and promotions were sold under pressure, charges for spiritual dispensations of all kinds were increased. Sale of indulgences, seed of the Reformation, became financially important. Instead of reform, abuses multiplied, further undermining faith.” (3/320ff.).

The schism finally ended in 1417 after the Council of Constance accepted the resignation of one pope, deposed two others, and then elected Pope Martin V. This assertion of the prerogative of a church council to depose a pope is the origin of the theory that popes are subject to general church councils – a view opposed by the present and previous pontiffs who view the church as an absolute monarchy.

Thomas à Kempis and the anti-humanist response

Medieval man did not accept Christ as his personal savior. He prayed that Christ would accept him as an infinitely unworthy supplicant, one who only wished to empathically embrace the sufferings of Christ and his saints. This was the personal piety preached by the friars and enshrined in *The Imitation of Christ*, the devotional masterpiece of Thomas à Kempis. It

was a significant departure from the aristocratic and hierarchical view of society and religion that had been dominant before the emergence of the humanistic sensibility of the bourgeoisie. In sculpture, the difference can be illustrated by two depictions of the Madonna and Child in The Metropolitan Museum of Art. In the earlier version [[Plate A](#)], there is no attempt to depict an actual maternal scene. There is no affective connection between Mary and Christ; and indeed, Christ is not depicted as an infant at all, but has the face of a middle aged man, a wise ruler sitting not on his mother's lap, but on the throne of wisdom that is the mother of God. By contrast, the latter sculpture [[Plate D](#)] is clearly the rather sentimental depiction of a mother lovingly and somewhat playfully interacting with a young child – who happens to be Christ, and thus happens to be God. Where the earlier portrayal ignored verisimilitude to convey the truth of the divine presence; the latter depiction represents that humanization of art that would dominate aesthetics in the West until the twentieth century.

The tradition of personal piety pre-figured by Bernard of Clairvaux, fostered by the friars and celebrated in *The Imitation of Christ*, was personified in the career of Joan of Arc. If it is true that hierarchical institutions cannot tolerate ideological opposition, it is also true that they cannot live with earnest believers – those who seriously embrace their teachings as personal truths, more important than the shifting dunes of bureaucratic expediency. Such could have been Bernard of Clairvaux, such was the martyred Joan of Arc, and such would be Martin Luther. All three elevated a personal vision of salvation above submission to canonical authority. Bernard was powerful enough to be untouchable and his challenge was subtle enough to be ignored. Joan and Luther were driven to an intransigent rigidity that brought Joan to a terrible death, and led to the Reformation and the European wars of religion. It is hard for us to remember the caution of Anatole France that to kill or to die for an idea is to place a very high value on conjecture.

Thomas à Kempis was the product of a movement of simple piety that fostered an empathic emotional response to the way of the cross – the agony and crucifixion of Christ. It was the sort of religiosity that appealed to the rising middle class that was understandably repelled by the corruption of the Church hierarchy. However, Thomas was no St. Francis. He preached an anti-intellectual, anti-humanistic creed that wallows in self-hatred. It would be easy to dismiss Thomas as a real misery – one who said that a long life was not something to wish for, but who himself lived to the astonishing age of ninety-two. (It would seem that the Lord was not that eager for his company, and didn't think his presence would add joy and harmony to the celestial choir.) However, he completed *The Imitation of Christ* around 1427, and within twenty-five years, it had been hand copied

over 250 times. Second only to the Bible, it was the greatest best seller of its age, and thus has much to say about the temper and religious sensibility of the time. God will one day be depicted by Michelangelo on the Sistine ceiling as a bearded old man, flying through the clouds like a geriatric Superman on steroids. He will be viewed by Renaissance Italians as creating objects that are naturally beautiful and enjoyable with the reasonable expectation that we will exercise our God-given abilities to appreciate and enjoy them. By contrast, there is the view of men like Thomas à Kempis, that God created the good things of this world not so we would be gratified by them, (heaven forbid!), but so that we could earn Paradise, and escape an eternity of burning in Hell, by resisting their appeal. Here is a sampling of his writings:

“This is the greatest wisdom – to seek the kingdom of heaven through contempt of the world . . . Truly to know and despise self is the best and most perfect counsel . . . Go where you may, you will find no rest except in humble obedience to the rule of authority [Note: an authority that was then burning people alive for daring to disagree it.] Living on earth is truly a misery. . . Blessed is he who keeps the moment of death ever before his eyes and prepares for it every day . . . In truth, we deceive ourselves by our ill-advised love of the flesh. What will that fire feed upon but our sins? The more we spare ourselves now, and the more we satisfy the flesh, the harder will the reckoning be, and the more we keep for the burning . . . It is good that even if love does not as yet restrain you from evil, at least the fear of hell does . . . The more violence you do to yourself, the more progress you will make.” (6/4ff.).

wycliffe and hus

It is hardly surprising that a decline in the moral authority of the Church would lead to heresy. In the latter fourteenth century, in a striking anticipation of the theological positions that would later be taken by Martin Luther, an Oxford scholar named John Wycliff denied the validity of the priesthood, the doctrine of transubstantiation, the necessity of the papacy along with the power of excommunication, confession, indulgences, pilgrimages and the worship of relics and saints. Not surprisingly, he was attacked as a heretic. However, he was so popular that he wasn't persecuted, but allowed to die a natural death in 1384. However, Lollardism, as his movement would be called in England, would later be persecuted by that great defender of the faith, Henry VIII. Henry succeeded in suppressing the movement by burning Lollards at the stake. However, the heretical teaching spread to Bohemia where the execution of Jan Hus

resulted in a series of wars in which the Hussites held their own against the forces of the Emperor before succumbing to sectarian division. In the eighteenth century a group of Hussites settled in Saxony where they founded the Moravian Church.

the artistic response

The artists of the fourteenth century responded to its calamities either by escapism or with an orgy of guilt. Men often tame the alienating horror of incomprehensible suffering by viewing it as justified punishment for imaginary or real transgression. This often seems preferable to confronting the disenchantment of a world emptied of moral significance and the drama of salvation. And so the robust attempt of Giotto and his followers to celebrate human reality was displaced by the gloomy art of Andrea Orcagna, an artist of deservedly small repute. He was merely one more foot soldier in the recurrent struggle of those who would infect what Peter Gay called the “party of humanity” with the poison of fear and guilt. Compare the spirit of either Giotto [[Plate B](#)] or Simone Martini [[Plate C](#)] to the Strozzi Altarpiece of Orcagna. [[Plate E](#)] Note the piercing condemnation of human frailty in the unsparing judgment of the wrathful eyes of Christ. This is not the God of love who had been the infant Jesus, and there would never be a loving Negro spiritual written about this Christ. He is not a figure to be tenderly embraced, but an inquisitor to be dreaded.

The other response that rejected the naturalism of Giotto was an aristocratic escape into a fantasy of refined Acadian grace not unlike the response of Boccaccio’s noble youths in the Decameron. Escapism in art and literature has always had a bad press – especially among the young and intense. However, it seems to me that there is so much unpleasantness and downright brutality in life, that effective escapism is not only a condition of sanity, but nice work if you can get it. It may not be morally dignified, but it is far braver than moral masochism. This approach begins with the work of Sienese artists such as Simone Martini and culminates in the International Style exemplified by the Wilton Diptych [[Plate F](#)] and the famous book of hours of the Duc de Berry. [[Plate G](#)] These are very pleasant fantasies of countryside and kingship. Of course, this idyllic depiction of peasant life doesn’t begin to reflect its brutal reality. No more does the serene and saintly depiction of King Richard II of England accurately depict the man who was king at the time of the Peasants’ Revolt and who would ultimately become a tyrant and a mumbling melancholic forced to abdicate in favor of his cousin, Henry Bolingbroke, better known as Henry IV.

THE DAWN OF A NEW ERA

The Early Renaissance

Renaissance Florence created the humanistic world view that would culminate in the Enlightenment of the Eighteenth century and would not be seriously challenged until our own time. Today it is under attack from the religious fundamentalisms of Islamic and Christian literalists. It is also challenged by certain extreme environmental zealots – those who respond to present-day environmental concerns not just by calling for prudent management of the conditions of human existence, but by urging that all human concerns be subordinated to a transcendent worship of Gaia. What is new about the Renaissance is a commitment to the doctrine of Protagoras that “Man is the measure of all things” (to which I would append the observation of Terence that “I am a human being; so nothing human is alien to me.” It is not merely a coincidence that genuine portraiture, in which the artist attempts to capture a true likeness rather than just an ideal type, was revived in this era. This new worldview reflected a new economic reality. In the fifteenth century, Europe changed from a society that was agricultural, feudal and ecclesiastical to one increasingly dominated by an urban middle class of bankers, manufacturers and traders, for the first time since the Roman Empire. (4/16).

Artists struggle with a perennial tension between the desire to express a certain vision of 'truth,' or to accurately capture a single perception. Egyptian and Medieval art opted for truth while Classical and Renaissance art chose perception. The artists of Florence didn't set out to imitate nature, but to depict the way someone actually perceived nature at a given time. This process had begun with Giotto and was renewed, at the beginning of the fifteenth century by Donatello and Masaccio in Florence. In 1416, Donatello completed his statue of St. George. [\[Plate H\]](#) Compare this to any Medieval statue you have ever seen and it will become clear that here we have something radically new. This warrior is clearly of this world and definitely corporeal. There is a very alert naked body underneath the clothing and armor. A sharply defined figure seems ready to spring into decisive action. Aesthetically, he partakes of the massive solidity of Giotto rather than the soft grace of Simone Martini and the International Style. This is appropriate as life in Florence was not delicately escapist, but confidently and even violently energetic, and ruthlessly competitive. The spirit of Giotto also pervades the revolutionary work painted for the church of Sta. Maria Novella in 1428 by Masaccio and entitled Holy Trinity with

the Virgin, St. John and Donors. [Plate I] This was one of the first paintings to make use of the system of mathematical rules by which objects appear to get smaller as they get farther away from us. That system of linear perspective was first devised in Florence by Brunelleschi. “We can imagine how amazed the Florentines must have been when this wall painting was revealed and seemed to have made a hole in the wall through which they could look into a new burial chapel.” (5/229). The invention of perspective through which objects are represented in a single unified space was to become the most important feature of Western art until the beginning of the twentieth century.

Arguably, there is a post modern assertion implicit in the introduction and centrality of perspective – namely, that as human beings, we can only perceive reality from a single perspective at a given time, though reality itself can be depicted from an infinity of perspectives. Humanism is thus a rejection of the Medieval pretension to depict the world as it 'really' is – from the perspective of God rather than of man.

coda: 1453

In 1453, there occurred three events that have proved pivotal for subsequent history: the end of the Hundred Years War between England and France, the fall of Constantinople to the forces of Islam, and the publication of the Gutenberg Bible (symbolic for the advent of printing by movable type, and thus for the potentialities and perils of general literacy).

Italian culture was about to embark on the High Renaissance: first in Florence, then in Rome and finally in Venice. This was the period of Italy's greatest glory in art, science and literature. However, the events of 1453 also heralded its long decline to the status of “a mere geographical expression.” Following the fall of Constantinople, the European political and cultural center of gravity was to shift from the Mediterranean world to the Atlantic states of Northern Europe. The Mediterranean Sea is an enclosed body of water, home to a classical civilization founded on notions of moderation, order and harmony. It was to be superseded by the culture of the limitless oceans – of open ended exploration and radical innovation. It was the beginning of a Faustian and Romantic spirit that would discover new worlds and create an unparalleled explosion of knowledge and power, lacking the reverence for moderation, order and harmony that will be essential to its survival.

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6. Thomas a Kempis; *The Imitation of Christ*

PLATES

A. Enthroned Virgin and Child; Metropolitan Museum of Art

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B Giotto; Lamentation; Capella degli Scrovegni, Padua, Italy

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C. Simone Martini; Annunciation; Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence

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D. Virgin and Child; Metropolitan Museum of Art

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E. Orcagna; The Strozzi Altarpiece; Santa Maria Novella, Florence

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F. Wilton Diptych; National Gallery, London, England

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G. Limbourg Brothers; Tres Riches Heures de Duc de Berry

<http://www.wga.hu/frames-e.html?html/l/limbourg/index.html>

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<http://www.andrewgrahamdixon.com/archive/readArticle/199>

I. Masaccio; The Holy Trinity with the Virgin, St. John and Two Donors;

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