

Overview of Western Art

Almost all cultures produce art, but Classical Western Art as we know it today emerged in 14th and 15th century Renaissance Italy. The artists of the Renaissance first restored and renewed many of the artistic techniques that were known in the most advanced era of the Ancient world, and then improved upon many of them. And since the fall of the Roman Empire, the Catholic Church was the primary agent for advancing the arts, by providing both financial support and spiritual inspiration to generations of Christian artists.

Art of the Ancient World—The Greek and Roman cultures of the Ancient world had advanced many important art forms. The Romans were known to be extraordinary engineers, who build thousands of miles of roads and aqueducts and enormous public buildings. Sculpture in all its forms, mosaics, and paintings were used to beautify buildings. Weaving, dying, and embroidery were advanced art forms, used to beautify cloths and make brilliant tapestries. Wood-carving, pottery, glass-making, and tanning and were also advanced arts, used to beautify household and personal items, and metal-smiths adorned everything from gold jewelry to implements of war. The wealth, commerce, and stability of Ancient Rome allowed arts and artisans of every manner to thrive.

Beginnings of Christian Art—During the first three centuries of Christendom, the Roman Empire was a thriving concern, but Christians were a minority, and most Christian art was private or involved secret symbols. It was not until Christianity was made legal in 313 AD that Christians could build Churches or freely display public art. Very quickly after gaining legitimacy, Christians established many traditions for decorating their churches using artwork and sculpture to beautify their churches and tell stories of the Gospels. But Christian art and architecture thrived for only a short time in the west. By the mid 400s the Western Empire collapsed. During the 5th and 6th centuries, Christian art and architecture continued to thrive in the Byzantine East but eventual the Moslem influence resulted in the Iconoclast heresy taking hold in the East and limiting artistic expression.

The Dark Ages—For hundreds of years, therefore, the peace and prosperity required to invest in ornamental art through Christendom was diminished to a point that artisans and craftsmen no longer had the skills or patronage needed to produce great works of art. By 800 AD Charlemagne brought a great deal of order to Western Christendom by conquering the Saxon and Lombard pagans and establishing the Holy Roman Empire. But even the 'Carolingian Renaissance' he initiated could not bring about a restoration of artistic traditions in the face of Viking attacks in the 9th, 10th, and 11th centuries, wars with Slavic and Magyar forces in Germany, and Turkish incursions in the Eastern Empire. It was not until about the 12th century, when most of Europe had been converted to Christianity, and the Crusades had re-established commerce in the East, that Christian civilization began to advance and thrive, and the rebirth of Western art soon followed.

The Rebirth of Christian Art—The first phase of the rebirth of Christian art was the Gothic revolution in architecture, stone-carving, and stained glass, which began in the 1100s in France. Stained glass and stone-cutting had long been associated with Christian Churches in western Europe, but the possibilities of both were dramatically expanded by the innovations of Gothic architecture. The Gothic period lasted over 200 years and resulted in the erection of hundreds of spectacular cathedrals and great Churches throughout Northern Europe.



BY 750 A.D. CHRISTENDOM WAS BEGINNING TO RECOVER IN THE WEST, BUT WAS STILL UNDER PRESSURE FROM PAGANS IN THE EAST, MOSLEMS IN THE SOUTH, AND VIKINGS FROM THE NORTH.

The Renaissance—The 1300's saw a rebirth of many of the long-neglected art forms from Classical Greece and Rome, especially in Italy. The artists of the Early Renaissance rediscovered and reinstated the best techniques of painting and sculpture, and in many cases surpassed the ancient masters. A few of the most important artists and innovators of the early Renaissance include:

- **Giotto**, who rediscovered the 'Fresco' a technique of painting water colors on wet plaster, allowing beautiful, life-size murals on walls and ceilings.
- **Brunelleschi**, who made great contributions to architecture with the design of the Duomo in Florence, and also described and promoted the idea of artistic "perspective".
- **Donatello**, the first of the genius sculptors of the Renaissance who revived the best traditions in both stone carving and casting.
- **Jan Van Eck**, the first great artist of the Renaissance in Flanders who introduced and popularized modern oil painting.

The Catholic Church was the primary patron of the arts during the Renaissance era, providing both financial support and spiritual inspiration, and many of the greatest works of art ever produced are still housed in its Cathedrals, chapels and monasteries.

The Flourishing of Christian Art—The 14th century saw the revival and progress of painting and sculptor, especially in key cities where 'schools', or groups of artists worked together, learning from each other and sharing techniques and materials. The most important artistic centers of the Renaissance Era were Florence, Venice, and Rome in Italy, and Flanders in the North.