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## Mind Games Survival Course Manual



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# The Flow of Western Culture

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## RENAISSANCE (1300--1700)

One can quibble as to when the Renaissance really began, but by the 1200s new ideas were flowing into Italy and Europe from both the East and from north Africa. And with the new ideas came a new view of man and his place in the natural world.

### I. Philosophy

*Renaissance* means "rebirth," and this was almost literally true in the realms of philosophy. It is difficult to name a "new" Renaissance philosophy, but many old forms were brought back to life as Europe moved away from belief in and worship of the one true God. Protagoras (c. 481--411 B.C.) had said that "Man is the measure of all things." { 15 } The subjective and limited focus of this dictum has constricted men's thinking up to the present day.

### 2. The Arts

While "philosophy as usual" may have been the norm, the visual arts were transformed in a way that revolutionized not only the way that we saw the world, but also the way we saw ourselves and even God.

#### A. Giotto (1266--1337) --*The Flight of the Holy Family into Egypt* (Arena Chapel, Padua, c. 1305--1306).

Here, perhaps 160 years after the preceding picture (*The Annunciation*), the change is astonishing. There are real people, with real emotions, in a real landscape. A near contemporary, Boccaccio (1313--1375), said "many times in the things he did one finds that the visual sense of men was mistaken, believing to be real that which was only painted." { 16 } We have to make a mental pilgrimage back to Giotto's day and fill ourselves with the Byzantine world before we can feel and see how different his pictures really were. One must recall that painting had remained essentially unchanged for the last thousand years to realize how radical were Giotto's innovations such as shadows, mountains, people with real faces, objects not just in the flat plane of the wall. They were so advanced that few followed

him at the time. But still, the seeds for a new view of nature and man had been sown.

2. **Masaccio (1401--1428)--*Expulsion from Paradise* (Brancacci Chapel, c. 1420, 6'2" x 2'9").**

100 years after Giotto, Masaccio was one of the first to reap the innovations Giotto had begun, and brought even greater naturalism (painting from nature in an effort to copy it) into painting. In this fresco Adam and Eve have anatomical bodies that express real grief in the very way they move. These are not only figures with motion, they are figures with emotion. And as they move their shadows follow them out of the Garden. This was the only sort of scene in which nudity was acceptable. But their bodies show us that Masaccio has been looking at real people.

3. **Jan van Eyck (c. 1385--1441)--*Madonna of Chancellor Rolin* (c. 1420?, 26" x 24 3/4").**

A number of things are amazing about this picture, some technical, some theological. At first, this is a rather typical picture of a patron who has paid to have his portrait painted, and to stress his importance, someone even more important is in the picture. But the Chancellor is the same size as Mary. Even in Giotto, we know who is important by how big they are. But here the Madonna does not dominate the picture, and a new element also appears behind them: a recognizable landscape. The first picture postcard of a city! Van Eyck is considered the first landscape painter, and in the background, as in another of his pictures from this period, is the city of Liege in Belgium, with the Meuse River and its docks and bridges clearly visible in the background. This is a portrait of a real man, and he is shown in the setting of a real city, his own. Many symbols are still present, such as the angel and crown over Mary, but real people are now just as dominant in the picture. Van Eyck may have been the first person to paint a self-portrait (1433), and he was one of the first to sign and date a picture (1432).

Van Eyck was a Flemish painter; popularly believed to have invented oil painting, though he actually perfected the technique. He was the greatest artist of northern Europe in the early Renaissance. His greatest work, the altarpiece *The Adoration of The Lamb*, is in the cathedral of St. Bavon in Ghent; it was completed in 1432. It consists of eight panels. An older brother, Hubert Van Eyck, is considered to have begun the work, and the finished product is probably their joint creation.

4. **Jean Fouquet (c. 1416--1480)--*The Red Virgin* (c. 1450).**

If one wished to look for a "watershed" picture in art, this might well qualify. Not only is the subject dealt with in a rather risqué manner, but the very model for the picture is totally implausible for the content of the picture. The Virgin Mary with baby Jesus was certainly a cliché by now. But to paint her with a breast exposed was a new innovation. And the very pose makes us ask, "Is this nudity for nudity's sake?" But even more radical is that the model (according to accounts that go back to the 1600s) is King Charles VII's mistress, Agnes Sorel. Paintings were only hung in courts or chapels when patrons paid for them at this time (who else could afford

them?), and anyone at the court would have known exactly who this was. So the whole spiritual theme of the painting is drained away by the very choice, both of pose and of the person who posed. The quest for realism in painting has moved beyond a balance between the Holy Creator and His creation to a creation that has no accountability to a Creator at all.

**5. Leonardo da Vinci (1452--1519)--*Mona Lisa* (c. 1503--1505, 30¼" x 20 3/8").**

Vasari (1511--1574) says the painting is a picture of Mona Lisa, the third wife of Francesco del Giocondo (referred to as La Gioconda). Why has this painting become immortal? Is it the mystery, the ambiguity, the silent, slightly mocking smile? Painting for Leonardo was a way to solve a problem. He was not a painter, primarily, but a scientist. We know of only about thirteen paintings by him, each seeming to be his solution to a particular quest to illustrate something. Here it may well be the relationship of man to nature, or dealing with light in a way that confuses the visual planes (and adds to the mystery of her face). One woman's remark on this picture is expressively insightful.

But for Leonardo this problem of man's relation to nature remained unsolved. For him the continual variation of the intensity of light and shade rendered the true essence of things ungraspable, and hence ungraspable also their relationships and meanings. His eye rested with the same interest on mountain peaks fading in the distance as on the quivering skin at the corners of a mouth that smiles through closed lips."{ 17}

**6. Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475--1564)--*The Creation of Adam* (Sistine Chapel, c. 1510).**

Just as Raphael was painting *The School of Athens*, Michelangelo was painting the most famous mural in history. Painted under horrible conditions, it is, certainly in scope and size, the greatest painting ever created. But, just as Fouquet's painting said much more than just its subject, so, too, Michelangelo says much about his theology and view of man in these monumental frescos. Here God and Adam are nearly the same size, much like the old stories of the gods and men. This picture is probably where Western culture got the image of God as an old man with a long, white beard. God not only comes down to give man life, he is like man. As Gardner says, "Both are made of the same substance, both are gigantic."{ 18}

There is an interesting detail often missed in the picture: Eve, still in God's mind, is watching the whole scene of the creation of her soon-to-be husband from under God's other arm. Her expression is most interesting.

In his later years, Michelangelo wrote a great deal of poetry. From 1537--1547, he was a close friend and literary companion of the poetess Vittoria Colonna, whom many conclude was a genuine Christian. At the same time he produced numerous drawings, many of them in highly-finished red or black chalk, on classical themes and Christian subjects, especially the Crucifixion and Resurrection. On the verge of his 90th year he was still

working in marble.

Leonardo probably marks the high point of the attempt to synthesize creation and the Creator, to reach some balance between God as the one responsible for the world and man as His vice-regent. Even in Michelangelo there is more of an attempt to mix the Platonic with the biblical, as in the Sistine chapel, with its Greek Sibyls beside Old Testament prophets. Few things remain statically in balance, and art is no exception. Soon the human would overwhelm the transcendent in painting.

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