**Introduction to Module 2: Early Renaissance**

Chronology of the Renaissance (rough dates): Early Renaissance 1400-1500; High Renaissance 1500-1520; Late Renaissance/Mannerism 1520-1550

In the early Quattrocento (400s = 1400s = 15th century), a new way of thinking emerged that stressed human dignity and potential and was inspired by forms and ideas drawn from Ancient Greece and Rome  - and so was born the period that we refer to as the Renaissance. The word "Renaissance," meaning "rebirth," comes first from the 16th century artist, architect, and art historian Giorgio Vasari who believed that this was a period when "art has been reborn and reached perfection." It was not really until the 18th century, however, that the term was actually used to describe what occurred first in Italy and then later throughout Europe in the 15th and 16th centuries. Certainly, the people living in this period did not refer to themselves as "people of the Renaissance," but they probably recognized that society and art were changing during this time.

For Italian Renaissance artists this "rebirth" of the ancient world encompassed not only works of art but also ancient texts and the classical literary style. This love of the ancient world in all of its forms led to the development of a philosophical idea known as Humanism. Humanism integrated the study of rhetoric, grammar, poetry, history, and moral philosophy (the so-called "humanities) together with Christianity. It sought to supplement faith by insisting on the dignity of the individual and human potential for achievement. While the emphasis was on humans and what they could achieve, the people of the Renaissance still believed in God and the Christian Church. They just believed that God created humans in his image and therefore were deserving of being celebrated for their accomplishments and individuality. Unlike what we saw in the Late Gothic period, in the Renaissance this new way of looking at the relationship between humans and God allowed for some movement within the social ranks - it was possible for people from poorer upbringings to achieve wealth and status in Renaissance society. Artists started to be recognized not just as servants to God and the Church but as individuals with talents that set them apart from others. The status of the artist will continue to rise as we move through the Early Renaissance and into the High Renaissance.

We will also see the merchant class become the rulers of Florence. Florence was a Republic at this time (a government made up of well-to-do citizen representatives) and was essentially run by the merchant families of the city. These merchants made and sold cloth and ran banking houses that had connections all over Europe. Families like the Medici, Strozzi, and Rucellai were particularly powerful and wealthy. The Medici were considered by many to be the unofficial rulers of Florence during much of the Early Renaissance - they never actually held public office, but they controlled much of the government of the city from behind the scenes. These merchants were also responsible for most of the art that was made at this time. Since many of the families were involved in banking one of their practices was lending money at high interest rates (kind of like credit cards or student loans). This was considered to be a sin in the eyes of the Church, a sin known as usury; the only way to assure a place in heaven for those who practiced it was to give a portion of it back to the Church through actual donations of money or, more usually, through paying for works of art to be made for religious spaces throughout the city. Of course, the merchants made sure that everyone, not just the Church officials, knew of their "generosity" and often put their own family coats-of-arms or their family saint(s) on or near works of art. The Medici were particularly clever about this: when you walk around Florence today you still see their coat-of-arms on many buildings, in churches, or on the frames of works of art. The Medici also made sure to hire only the best artists and brought many of them into the family palace in Florence to mentor them in the philosophy of Humanism and introduce them to ancient ideas through the Medici collection of ancient art and manuscripts.

Medici Coat of Arms from the Medici Palace

In the Early Italian Renaissance there are four artists who can be considered foundational to the development of the Renaissance style:  Lorenzo Ghiberti (sculptor); Filippo Brunelleschi (architect); Donatello (sculptor); and Masaccio (painter). These four artists really introduced many new, or newly revived, elements into art that will be the basis for Western art for the next 500 years. This includes things like perspective (a way of creating the illusion of three-dimensionality in a two-dimensional painting), chiaroscuro (modeling of form with light and dark to create three-dimensional effects), and the contrapposto stance (a stance developed by the ancient Greeks and revived in the Renaissance in which one leg is straight and the other bent reflecting a natural pose of human beings) (all of which you will be reading about and looking at in the materials I have selected for this module). What these early artists developed will be picked up and refined by artists of the second half of the 15th century like Paolo Uccello (known as "Mr. Perspective" because of his love of this technique), Piero della Francesca (a Humanist artist interested in perspective and chiaroscuro), and Fra Angelico (literally "Brother Angel" because he was both a monk and an artist who painted things very beautifully). Together, these early Renaissance artists will set the stage for artists like Leonardo, Michelangelo and Raphael.

***Keep all of this general background in mind as you explore the readings and videos for this Module***

**Learning Objectives**

After completing this module, students will be able to:

1. Recognize and be able to discuss the developments of the Early Renaissance.
2. Recognize and be able to discuss the contributions and innovations of the artists Ghiberti, Brunelleschi, Donatello, and Masaccio and their roles in the development of Early Renaissance art.
3. Recognize and be able to discuss the developments of illusionism in Early Renaissance art.
4. Understand the broader societal context for the works of art of this time.

**General Instructions for Reading and Video Assignments:**The readings and videos for this section are grouped in sections so that related material is easily accessible. Try to follow the organization of these sections and read and watch in the order that they are listed. In this way, you will be following a story that will make much more sense. Readings without links can be found at the bottom of the Reading and Video Assignments under PDF Readings.