

Introduction to Year 2 Art History Memory Work

Around the year 600, Pope Gregory the Great wrote to Bishop Serenus of Marseilles, in France. Bishop Serenus had been destroying the religious images (*iconoclasm*) in his churches, because he was concerned that his congregations were worshipping the pictures themselves rather than what they represented. Pope Gregory defended the art, explaining to Serenus, *"For a picture is displayed in churches on this account, in order that those who do not know letters may at least read by seeing on the walls what they are unable to read in books."* Over the centuries, the phrase was shortened into the pithier *"pictures are for the illiterate what writing is for those who can read"* or, most memorably, *"pictures are the Bible of the illiterate."*

The Church has been the single greatest patron of Western art for over a thousand years, and nearly every work on this list was created either directly for the Church or under the deep and lasting influence of Christianity. The works of art chosen for the Memory Work include some of the most famous and well-known images of the period, as well as illustrations of important contemporary themes: the Dark Ages, monasticism, and the spread of Christianity throughout Europe; the flowering of Gothic art and architecture in the High Middle Ages; the Renaissance, which brought a renewed interest in the ancient world and the rise of humanism; the transformation of the role of the artist from anonymous craftsman to celebrated genius; and the invention of the printing press, and the rise in literacy and education that resulted.

Stylistically, the decline of the Roman Empire saw a gradual loss of interest in the styles of art achieved by the Classical Greeks and long imitated by the Romans. The interest in realistic, naturalistic art, characterized by the careful reproduction of the human body and the use of perspective, gave way to more stylized and repetitive forms. In the remote monasteries of Ireland and Britain, art survived mainly in the ornate decoration of practical objects, such as the Sutton Hoo helmet, the Alfred Jewel, and the Book of Kells. In Ravenna, Italy, the glittering mosaics of Justinian and Theodora reveal a still-thriving Christian Roman Empire, ruled from Constantinople, that carried the traditions of the old Roman world directly into the Middle Ages.

During this period, crafts were organized under an elaborate system of guilds and apprenticeships, in which a master craftsman trained apprentices over many years. This workshop system is part of why so much medieval art comes down to us unsigned and anonymous; the individual artist mattered far less than the finished work and the greater glory it served. Painting was only one among many decorative arts, alongside goldsmithing and enamel work, embroidery, weaving, stonework, book illumination, and stained glass, many of which had their roots in monastic workshops. Art was usually created to give glory to God, or to a monarch. Paintings were usually of religious subjects and conveyed timeless truths. Gold backgrounds reflected candlelight during prayer, and subjects were often depicted as still, motionless, and

eternal, rather than caught in a specific moment of action. Compare the static, frontal poses of Christ in the Book of Kells, the figures on the San Damiano cross, and the apse mosaics of Justinian and Theodora, to the later narrative drama of Giotto's Lamentation, or the frenzy of activity in Michelangelo's Last Judgment.

By the High Middle Ages, roughly 1000 to 1300, Europe was recovering its confidence. Trade revived, towns and universities grew, and new religious orders, especially the Franciscans and Dominicans, brought fresh energy and reform to the life of the Church. This was the great age of the Gothic cathedral, an engineering marvel that used pointed arches and flying buttresses to funnel the weight of a stone roof down through slender columns, freeing the walls to be filled with soaring stained glass, as at Chartres. Painters like Giotto began to experiment with depicting three-dimensionality and individual human emotion, planting seeds that would not fully blossom until the Renaissance, a century or more later.

During the Renaissance, there was a renewed interest in art for its own sake, and specifically in rediscovering the art of the Classical world. Artists strove to create pictures that appeared to be windows into a three-dimensional world. Like the Ancient Greeks, they studied the human body so that they could depict it more accurately. New technologies, such as oil paints, and the use of canvas instead of wood panels or plaster walls, were perfected during this period. Individual artists were increasingly celebrated as geniuses, not merely skilled craftsmen, and the most famous artists were sought after by kings and popes alike. Portraiture became popular, woodblock prints and copperplate engravings, such as Dürer's prints, made art more widely available to the middle classes for the first time, and the printed book enabled the spread of information and learning that would lead to the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment.

Glossary of Terms

Aestel - A pointer with a decorative handle, used to follow lines of text while reading a manuscript.

Allegory / Allegorical - A work of art in which the figures and objects stand for abstract ideas rather than telling a literal story. *La Primavera* is described as an allegory of Spring.

Apse - The domed, semicircular recess at the altar end of a church.

Barrel vault - A continuous, arched stone ceiling shaped like a half-cylinder, typical of Romanesque church architecture.

Barrow - A large earthen burial mound.

Book of Hours - A personal prayer book containing readings and prayers assigned to each of the day's canonical hours, along with a calendar of feast days.

Buttress / Flying buttress - An external stone support that carries the weight of a roof outward and down, freeing the walls beneath to be filled with windows.

Byzantine (icon style) - The formal, stylized artistic tradition of the Eastern Roman Empire, marked by elongated features and flat gold backgrounds.

Cartoon - A full-size preparatory drawing used as a guide for a larger finished work.

Chiaroscuro - Italian for "light-dark"; the use of strong contrast between light and shadow to give painted forms a sense of solidity.

Chi-Rho - A monogram of the first two Greek letters of "Christ," used as an early Christian symbol.

Conclave - The meeting of the College of Cardinals to elect a new pope.

Contrapposto - Italian for "counterpose"; a standing pose with the weight shifted onto one leg, producing a natural S-curve through the body.

Devotional (image) - A picture made for private prayer rather than public display.

Diptych - Two hinged panels, often used for personal prayer.

Embroidery - Decorative needlework stitched onto a fabric background, as distinct from weaving.

Enamel - Colored glass fused onto metal by firing, used for decoration on metalwork.

Finial - A decorative ornament at the top or end of an object.

Fresco - A painting made by applying pigment onto fresh, wet plaster, so the color is absorbed into the wall as it dries.

Gesso - A chalky white primer used to prepare a wood panel for painting.

Gilt / Gilded - Covered with a thin layer of gold leaf: real gold hammered into paper-thin sheets

Gothic - The architectural and artistic style following the Romanesque, marked by pointed arches and large windows; originally called *opus Francigenum*.

Guild - An organization of craftsmen in a particular trade that controlled training and standards, typically through a system of masters and apprentices.

Heraldic - Relating to the symbols and coats of arms used to identify a noble family or kingdom.

Hiberno-Saxon - The art style of post-Roman Ireland and Britain, blending Celtic and Anglo-Saxon influences.

Icon cross - A crucifix decorated with additional small scenes from Christ's life, used to teach the Gospel to the illiterate.

Illumination / Illuminated manuscript - A hand-decorated manuscript, often using gold leaf.

Interlacing - Ornamental patterns of ribbon-like lines woven over and under one another, typical of Celtic art.

International Gothic - An elegant, courtly style of art spread across Europe in the late 1300s and early 1400s.

Isocephalism - A composition in which figures are arranged with their heads aligned at the same height (from the Greek, iso = equal, cephalos – head)

Lancet (window) - A tall, narrow window with a pointed arch top.

Lapis lazuli - A deep blue semiprecious stone ground to make the pigment ultramarine.

Linear perspective - A system using converging lines to create the illusion of depth on a flat surface.

Livery badge - A personal emblem worn by a lord and his household to show allegiance.

Lozenge - A diamond or rhombus shape used in decorative design.

Mancus - A gold coin used in Anglo-Saxon England.

Mandorla - An almond-shaped, full-body halo, traditionally used for sacred figures.

Miniature - A small painted illustration within a manuscript.

Mosaic - An image built from small pieces of colored glass or stone.

Neoplatonic / Neoplatonism - A Renaissance school of philosophy blending Plato's ideas with Christian thought, often reflected in mythological paintings.

Panel (painting) - A painting made on planks of wood, fitted together and smoothed

Pattens - Wooden overshoes worn to protect fine shoes from mud.

Pommel - The rounded knob at the end of a sword's hilt.

Predella - A narrow strip of small painted scenes along the base of a larger altarpiece.

Punchmarks - Small decorative stamps pressed into gold leaf.

Quatrefoil - A four-lobed decorative shape, common in Gothic design.

Relief (printmaking) - A printing method in which the design stands raised above a cut-away background, as in a woodcut.

Reliquary - A container made to hold the relics of a saint.

Rivet - A metal fastener used to join pieces of material, as in shipbuilding.

Romanesque - The architectural and artistic style before the Gothic, marked by thick walls and rounded arches.

Rose window - A large, round stained-glass window, often divided into radiating patterns.

Roundel - A small circular painting or decorative panel.

Scriptorium (plural: scriptoria) - A room in a monastery set aside for writing and copying manuscripts.

Sfumato - Italian for "smoked" or "hazy"; a technique of blending color and outline so gradually that no hard edges are visible.

Stanza (plural: Stanze) - Italian for "room"; used to refer to the suite of rooms in the Vatican Palace decorated by Raphael.

Tempera - A paint made by binding pigment with egg yolk, commonly used on wood panels.

Terracotta - Baked clay, used as a sculptural material.

Tessera (plural: tesserae) - The small individual pieces of glass or stone used to build a mosaic.

Transept - The arm of a cross-shaped church that crosses the main body at a right angle.

Triptych - A three-paneled work, often hinged to fold shut, commonly used as an altarpiece.

Ultramarine - A brilliant, costly blue pigment made from ground lapis lazuli.

Vanishing point - The single point on the horizon toward which parallel lines appear to converge in linear perspective.

Vellum - A writing surface made from prepared animal skin.

Vermilion - A vivid red pigment.

Woodcut / Copper engraving / Burin / Intaglio - Related printmaking terms: a *woodcut* is carved into wood as a relief print; a *copper engraving* is cut into copper with a *burin* (a sharp steel tool), an *intaglio* method in which ink sits in the incised lines rather than on a raised surface.

Unit 1: Sutton Hoo Helmet, Anglo-Saxon, c. 650

This helmet comes from one of the most spectacular archaeological finds in British history. In 1938, excavators at Sutton Hoo in East Anglia, England, uncovered a barrow, an large earthen burial mound, that turned out to contain an entire ship burial. The wooden ship itself had rotted away centuries earlier, but the sand around it had been stained by minerals from the decaying wood, and every iron rivet remained in its original position, allowing archaeologists to reconstruct the ship's exact shape and size, about 90 feet long.

The helmet is made of iron, elaborately decorated with bronze. A dragon in flight forms the face: its garnet studded wings become the eyebrows, and its tail becomes the moustache. It was buried alongside a dazzling collection of grave goods, including a nested set of ten silver bowls from the Byzantine Empire, two silver spoons inscribed "Saul" and "Paul" (possibly a baptismal gift), a gold and garnet sword pommel, spears, a wolf-headed standard, an ornate purse lid, shoulder clasps, and a great gold buckle. Forty Frankish coins, each from a different mint and dated between 585 and 625, help date the burial and have led scholars to suggest the man buried here was Raedwald, King of the East Angles, who reigned from about 599 to 624. The Venerable Bede tells us that Raedwald was the first king of the East Angles to convert to Christianity, though the pagan practice of burying grave goods for use in the afterlife along with the Christian objects in the burial suggests that both pagan and Christian customs co-existed in his kingdom.

The ship, the warriors, and the gold all call to mind the world of the Old English epic *Beowulf*, and the burial's Scandinavian style goods point to close ties between early England and Scandinavia. Most of the helmet you see in the image today is a careful modern reconstruction, since the original was crushed when the burial chamber's roof caved in. Both the reconstruction and the original fragments are on display in the British Museum in London.

Unit 2: Book of Kells, Celtic, c. 800

The Book of Kells is a lavishly illuminated Gospel manuscript, about 13 by 10 inches, written in Latin on vellum (prepared calfskin) around 800 AD. It belongs to the Hiberno-Saxon style, the art of post-Roman Britain and Ireland, and was produced in the scriptoria of monasteries founded in the tradition of Saint Columba (better known as Saint Colm Cille). Scholars believe that this manuscript was either made entirely at the monastery of Iona in Scotland, or was begun there and finished at the Abbey of Kells in County Meath, Ireland, after Viking raids forced the Iona monks to flee. It remained at Kells until 1654, when it was sent to Trinity College, Dublin, for safekeeping from Oliver Cromwell's troops, and it remains there today.

The earliest mention of the manuscript appears in the *Annals of Ulster* (the yearly records) for the year 1007, which records that "the great Gospel of Columcille, the chief relic of the Western world," was stolen in the night from the church at Kells "on account of its wrought shrine," meaning that thieves wanted its jeweled cover rather than the book itself. It was discovered a few months later, buried under a sod of earth, but the golden cover was gone.

The decoration combines traditional Christian imagery with the swirling knotwork typical of Celtic art. Human figures, animals, and fantastical beasts twist through interlacing patterns in vivid color. The image shown here is a portrait page of Christ Enthroned, flanked by two peacocks. Saint Augustine had written about the traditional belief that peacock flesh did not decay, so the peacock became an early Christian symbol of eternal life and the Resurrection.

Unit 3: Bayeux Tapestry, Norman, 1070s

Despite its name, the Bayeux Tapestry is not actually a tapestry at all. True tapestries are woven on a loom, while this enormous work, 230 feet long and only 20 inches high, is embroidered with wool thread onto linen. It was made within a decade or so of the Norman Conquest of 1066, likely commissioned by Bishop Odo of Bayeux, William the Conqueror's half-brother. William, Duke of Normandy, claimed he was the rightful heir to the English throne after the death of King Edward the Confessor. William argued that the rival claimant, Harold, Earl of Wessex, had previously sworn a solemn oath of loyalty, over the relics of saints, to William, and that by declaring himself the new king of England, Harold was breaking his oath.

The tapestry narrates the whole story, in 58 scenes, with 626 figures, like a very long comic strip: from Harold's alleged oath on a casket of relics, through the death and burial of Edward at the newly finished Westminster Abbey, William's preparations for invasion, the crossing of the Channel, and the climactic Battle of Hastings. Captions embroidered in Latin explain the story, including "*Harold Rex interfectus est*" ("King Harold is killed") above a figure clutching an arrow near his face, the source of the traditional idea that Harold died from an arrow to the eye. The tapestry also captures the appearance of Halley's Comet in 1066, with onlookers pointing up in astonishment ("*isti mirant stella*"; "they wonder at the star"). Halley's Comet would not return to the skies for another 76 years, and its appearance just before the invasion was widely read at the time as an omen. Notice the little additional details in the bottom margin, including all the peasants removing chainmail from fallen soldiers at the Battle of Hastings.

The tapestry is usually exhibited at Bayeux Cathedral in France but will be on loan at the British Museum from September 2026 to July 2027.

Unit 4: Rose Window, Chartres Cathedral, c. 1235

From the late tenth century onward, most European churches were built in the Romanesque style, which relied on thick, heavy walls to hold up stone barrel vaulted roofs. Windows were minimal, because leaving spaces in the stonework weakened it, making the building unstable. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, architects developed the pointed arch and the flying buttress; these developments funneled the weight of the roof down through internal columns and external supports, allowing the walls to be opened up for windows. This new style was originally called *opus Francigenum*, "French work." It only earned the name "Gothic" later, during the Renaissance, when Italian architects who preferred reviving Classical styles used the term as an insult, comparing it to the "barbarian" Goths.

Abbot Suger, who rebuilt the Abbey of Saint-Denis in this new style, wanted to make a theological point: quoting from the First Epistle of John, that "God is light," he argued that a church should be filled with light, color, and beauty as a foretaste of the heavenly Jerusalem described in Revelation. Chartres Cathedral has four great rose (round, or flower-shaped) windows. This one, in the north transept, is known as the House of France window because it was funded by King Louis IX and his mother, Blanche of Castile.

At the center is the Madonna and Child, surrounded by attendants in concentric circles: doves representing the gifts of the Holy Spirit, angels with censers, and cherubim; diamond shaped panels showing the ancestor kings of Judah from the Gospel of Matthew; and an outer ring of the twelve minor prophets. Quatrefoils (four-leaf shapes) between the rings display the coat of arms of France. Below the rose, tall narrow lancet windows alternate the golden *fleur de lys* (lily flower) of France with the golden castle of Castile, and pair virtuous and sinful Old Testament rulers: King David above the murderous King Saul, King Solomon above the idol-worshipping Jeroboam, and in the center, the Virgin Mary held in the arms of her mother, Saint Anne, above the royal coat of arms of France. The window is roughly 34 feet in diameter, and much of its original thirteenth century glass survives today, remarkably undamaged by wars and revolutions.

Unit 5: Duccio di Buoninsegna, *Madonna and Child*, c. 1300

This small panel painting, only about 11 by 8 inches, captures a moment of transition between the older Byzantine icon tradition and the coming Italian Renaissance. The Madonna's oval face, elongated nose, and the "miniature adult" appearance of the Christ Child are hallmarks of Byzantine style, where the Child was often shown not as a soft infant but as a small, solemn man, as is the plain gold background. But Duccio was also trying something stylistically new and different, the depiction of a relatable emotional bond between mother and son. Mary gazes at her child with tender thoughtfulness, and the infant reaches up toward her face with a very natural childlike gesture. The elegant folds of drapery and the marble parapet along the bottom edge place the figures in a believable, three-dimensional space, even as that parapet still separates them from the viewer, like a window ledge.

This painting was made as a private devotional image, meant for personal prayer rather than public display in a church. Burn marks along the lower edge of the frame come from candles that were once lit in front of it during prayer, over centuries of quiet devotion. Duccio was among the most important painters of the Sienese school, and only 13 paintings in the entire world are confidently attributed to him. The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York purchased this panel in 2004 for \$45 million, at the time one of the highest prices ever paid for an Old Master painting.

Unit 6: Limbourg Brothers, "October," from the *Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*, French, c. 1412

This page comes from a Book of Hours, a personal prayer book containing readings and prayers for each of the canonical hours of the day, made for Jean, Duke of Berry, one of the wealthiest patrons in France. Work began around 1412, carried out by three brothers, Paul, Jean, and Herman Limbourg, but was left unfinished in 1416 when all three brothers died, likely of plague, in the same year as the duke himself. They completed 206 leaves of vellum, including 66 large full-page illustrations like this one and 65 smaller miniatures. The book is bound today in eighteenth century red gilt morocco leather.

It was called the *Très Riches Heures*, "the very rich hours," to distinguish it from two other, less extravagant Books of Hours the duke also owned, the *Belles Heures* ("the beautiful hours") and the *Petites Heures* ("the little hours"). Along with prayers, the book contains a calendar marking church feasts, saints' days, and the traditional labors appropriate to each month. The illustration is of the page for October: a peasant sowing seed while a scarecrow guards the field.

Each month's page also includes the appropriate zodiac sign and a golden solar chariot in the blue semicircle above, along with a lunar calendar for church use. Several illuminations throughout the book include portraits of the duke himself, along with castles and estates he owned. It is considered the finest surviving example of International Gothic manuscript illumination and is preserved today at the Musée Condé in Chantilly, France.

Unit 7: Fra Angelico, *Annunciation*, c. 1450

This *Annunciation* is a fresco, a painting made by applying pigment directly onto fresh, wet plaster so that the color is absorbed into the wall itself as it dries. It decorates a wall in the Convent of San Marco in Florence, commissioned by Cosimo de' Medici, and Fra Angelico, a Dominican friar himself, painted several versions of this same subject over his career (this one is often compared to his other famous *Annunciation*, now in the Prado Museum in Spain). He is often credited with a new way of imagining the scene: instead of Mary enthroned formally against a flat gold background, meant to suggest something timeless and heavenly, he shows the angel Gabriel greeting Mary in a naturalistic outdoor setting.

The figures here also look different from those in earlier medieval art. They have real weight and stand solidly on the ground rather than seeming to float. The architecture behind them is drawn with straight lines converging correctly toward a single vanishing point, an early and confident use of linear perspective.

This fresco was painted at the top of the stairs leading to the monks' individual cells, so that every friar walking to bed would pass directly by the scene of the annunciation. Beneath the image is an inscription reading, roughly, "When you come before the image of the Ever-virgin, take care not to neglect to say a Hail Mary," a gentle daily reminder built right into the architecture of monastic life.

Unit 8: Piero della Francesca, *The Baptism of Christ*, c. 1450s

This panel, measuring about 66 by 46 inches, was originally the central section of a larger altarpiece. It likely once had two side panels depicting Saint Peter and Saint Paul, making it a triptych, along with a predella (a narrow strip of small scenes along the bottom) and possibly a roundel above showing God the Father, which would have completed the image of the Trinity alongside Christ and the dove of the Holy Spirit. It was painted in tempera, paint made by binding pigment with egg yolk, on a wood panel.

Piero della Francesca was fascinated by geometry and mathematical proportion, and this painting is full of careful visual structure. Notice how the angle formed by Saint John the Baptist's legs echoes the angle formed by his raised arm and head. The dove, the dish of water, and the figure of Christ line up along a strong central vertical axis, while the walnut tree at the left divides the composition according to the Golden Ratio, a proportion long admired for its visual harmony. The three angels standing together at the left, holding hands, may be a subtle reference to the Council of Florence, held from 1431 to 1439, which attempted (unsuccessfully) to reunite the Eastern and Western Churches, an idea reinforced by the figure at right dressed in Eastern style clothing, generally understood to represent Byzantine visitors.

The panel was commissioned around 1440 by the Camaldolese monastery of Sansepolcro in Tuscany, now Sansepolcro Cathedral. The Camaldolese monk and theologian Saint Ambrose Traversari, who died in 1439, had been a strong supporter of church unity, which may explain the painting's theme. The town visible in the background is thought to be Sansepolcro itself, Piero della Francesca's own hometown.

Unit 9: Sandro Botticelli, *The Birth of Venus*, 1486

If this is “*The Birth of Venus*”, where is the baby? Greek legend told that Aphrodite (Venus to the Romans) sprang fully grown from the ocean foam and came to land, and that flowers appeared wherever she stepped. The painting shows the moment when Venus has been blown ashore on a giant scallop shell and is about to be clothed, a scene that closely matches an ancient Greek Homeric *Hymn to Aphrodite* that had been published in Florence in 1488. On the left, Zephyr, god of the west wind, blows Venus toward shore alongside Aura, a personification of a gentle breeze. On the right, one of the Horae, minor Greek goddesses who attended Venus, waits to wrap her in a cloak; the flowers on her dress suggest she may represent spring.

At roughly 6 by 9 feet, this large painting was made on canvas, still a new medium for painting at the time. Earlier paintings had been done on wooden panels or directly onto plaster walls as fresco, both heavy and essentially immovable. Canvas paintings could be taken off their wooden supports, rolled up, and transported far more easily. The idea of painting on canvas is thought to have spread from Venice, possibly inspired by the large sailcloth used on merchant ships.

The painting is unusual for two reasons: its subject matter, drawn from classical mythology, and its large-scale female nude, both quite rare in Christian art up to this point. Traditionally, Eve was the only female nude permissible in Christian art, to allow the accurate depiction of the Creation and Fall. *The Birth of Venus* exemplifies the growing interest of the Renaissance in Classical literature and art.

The painting may have been commissioned for the wedding of Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici, a cousin of the great Florentine ruler Lorenzo the Magnificent. The laurel trees in the background and the laurel leaves woven into the Horae's hair may be a visual pun on the Medici name, since the Italian word for laurel, “lauro,” closely echoes “Lorenzo.”

Unit 10: *Unicorn in Captivity* Tapestry, South Netherlands, c. 1495-1505

This tapestry is one of a set of seven, woven in Brussels between 1495 and 1505 out of wool, silk, and threads wrapped in real silver and gold. Made for a noble French family, they would have originally hung on the walls of a great stone chateau, adding both color and warmth. The set was looted during the French Revolution and vanished from the historical record for decades, until it was rediscovered in the 1850s, being used to cover potatoes in a barn. Today all seven tapestries hang in The Cloisters, the medieval branch of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

Together, the tapestries tell the story of a hunt for a magical white unicorn, from its pursuit through an idealized French landscape to its capture and wounding, ending with this final scene of the unicorn peacefully enclosed within a low fence. The background is astonishingly detailed, illustrating over 100 different plants, more than 65 of which botanists have been able to identify, including lilies, forget-me-nots, pomegranates, and orange trees, somehow all blooming at once. Animals wild and tame wander through the scene: pheasants, rabbits, a lion and lioness, ducks swimming in a stream, hunting dogs, and even a tiny frog hidden in the greenery.

Historians have proposed many interpretations of the tapestries, ranging from stories of chivalric romance to Christian allegory. According to an old legend, a unicorn could only be tamed by a virgin, and medieval Christians often read this as a symbol of Christ and the Virgin Mary. The set may have been commissioned to celebrate a wedding, with the taming of the wild unicorn representing the way love tames and settles the heart. Each tapestry bears the monogram "AE" woven somewhere into the design, but whose initials these are remains unknown.

Unit 11: Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Tower of Babel*, c. 1563

The Renaissance started in Italy and spread throughout Europe, developing a distinctively different style in the North. While Italian Renaissance artists were fascinated by their Roman heritage, with classical mythology, idealized human bodies, and mathematical perspective, north of the Alps, in places like Flanders, the Netherlands, and Germany, artists tended to care less about heroic nudes and Greek gods, and more about the texture of everyday life: crowded village scenes, ordinary peasants, closely observed plants and animals, and small moral or religious lessons tucked into homely, familiar settings. Oil paint, which allowed for extraordinary fine detail, became popular in the North well before it caught on in Italy, where fresco and tempera remained dominant for longer.

Pieter Bruegel the Elder was one of the great masters of this Northern tradition. A Catholic himself, he was painting at a time of rising religious tensions between Catholics and Protestants, and he seems to have avoided traditional Catholic subjects of saints and martyrs and turned instead toward uncontroversial Old Testament narrative, moral allegory, and scenes of everyday village life.

Bruegel imagined the Tower of Babel as a massive concentric spiral, wrapping around and rising above a small, steep hill. The tower is shown as unstable: its arches sit at odd, perpendicular angles to the sloped ground beneath them, and the lower floors appear unfinished even as workers keep piling new stories on top, a visual joke about ambition outrunning prudence and good sense. The structure's design is suggestive of the Colosseum in Rome, which Bruegel had seen during a trip to Italy in 1552-1553. In the sixteenth century, the Colosseum was widely viewed as a symbol of the sin of pride and also of the Roman persecution of early Christians, appropriate associations for a painting about human arrogance meeting divine judgment. Although the story of Babel is set in the ancient world, Bruegel dresses his workers and builders in the clothing of his own sixteenth century Flanders, and fills the surrounding landscape with the harbors, cranes, and brick buildings of a bustling contemporary port city, a common trick that let Northern artists bring old Bible stories vividly into their viewers' own everyday world.

According to the Book of Genesis, the tower's construction was ordered by Nimrod, who was described as a mighty hunter and, according to tradition, a great-grandson of Noah and king of Shinar, in ancient Mesopotamia. Bruegel places Nimrod in the left foreground, inspecting a group of stonecutters, in front of a large stone block bearing the artist's own signature: "Bruegel, made in 1563." Bruegel painted at least two versions of the Tower of Babel; the larger one is now in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna.

Unit 12: Albrecht Dürer, *Rhinoceros*, 1515

This image is a woodcut, a print made by carving an image into a block of wood (pearwood was considered the best), inking the raised surface, and pressing it onto paper. This technique enabled artists to print and sell many copies of a single image cheaply, unlike paintings, which had to be created one at a time.

The rhinoceros itself, named Ganda, had been shipped from India to Lisbon, Portugal, in 1515, and was the first rhinoceros seen in Europe since Roman times. King Manuel I of Portugal, curious to test an old claim by the Roman writer Pliny the Elder that elephants and rhinoceroses were natural enemies, staged a fight between the rhino and a young elephant from his own menagerie. The elephant reportedly fled in panic before the fight even began. Manuel decided to send the rhinoceros on to Rome as a gift for Pope Leo X, following an earlier gift of a white elephant named Hanno that had delighted the pope. Unfortunately, the ship carrying the rhinoceros was wrecked in a storm off the Italian coast, and the animal drowned. Its body was recovered, stuffed, and displayed in Rome, though no records survive of what eventually happened to it.

Dürer, working in Germany, never actually saw the animal in person. He based his woodcut entirely on a written description and rough sketch sent by an unknown eyewitness in Lisbon. As a result, his rhinoceros is wildly inaccurate: its skin is shown as hard, riveted armor plates, its legs are scaly, and it even sports a small entirely invented horn on its shoulder. Inaccurate or not, the image was tremendously popular and influential, and copies of it were still being printed in German schoolbooks as late as the 1930s. Dürer's rhinoceros continued to shape European ideas of what the animal looked like for over two hundred years, even after live rhinos were later exhibited in Europe.

Unit 13: Raphael, *School of Athens*, 1510

This famous fresco covers a wall in a suite of rooms in the Vatican Palace known as the Raphael Rooms, or *Stanze*. This particular room, the *Stanza della Segnatura* ("Room of the Signature"), housed the personal library of Pope Julius II and was used for signing and sealing important papal documents.

Raphael painted all four walls of the room, and the images reflect the library's contents, with themes of philosophy, theology, law, and the virtues, expressing a very Renaissance humanist idea: that the wisdom of the ancient Greek philosophers and the truths of Christian faith could co-exist in harmony. The other three walls depict the *Disputation of the Sacrament* (a scene of theological debate), Parnassus (the Greek Muses, inspirational Greek goddesses of literature, science, and the arts, gathered on their sacred mountain), and personifications of the Cardinal Virtues (Fortitude, Prudence and Temperance), and the Theological Virtues (Faith, Hope and Charity).

The School of Athens, the most famous of the four frescoes, shows the great philosophers and thinkers of ancient Greece beneath a soaring classical archway. At the center, Plato (on the left, elderly, in red, holding his *Timaeus*) gestures upward, while Aristotle (on the right, in blue, holding his *Ethics*) gestures down toward the earth, together forming a visual summary of Plato's focus on eternal, abstract ideas and Aristotle's focus on the observable, physical world. The grand architectural setting echoes the design of the new Saint Peter's Basilica, then under construction just a short walk away. Statues of Apollo, god of music and light, and Athena, goddess of wisdom, stand watch in niches on either side. The composition is a highpoint of Renaissance art, using both one-point and two-point perspective, an ordered, careful composition, and classical subject matter.

Scholars have identified many of the other figures, including Euclid with compasses and slate in the right foreground, Diogenes sprawled on the steps, and Zoroaster and Ptolemy, with globes, on the right - though debate continues over many identities. Raphael painted Pythagoras (to the left, writing in a book) with the face of Raphael's contemporary, Leonardo da Vinci, and gave the brooding figure of Heraclitus, seated alone in purple with boots, the features of Michelangelo, who was at that very moment painting the Sistine Chapel ceiling nearby. The figure on the far right, in the black hat, looking directly out at the viewer is Raphael himself. The figure on the left in the white robe who looks out at the viewer has been identified as Hypatia, a 4th century female Neoplatonist philosopher and mathematician, or alternatively as Francesco Maria I della Rovere, nephew of Pope Julius II. It is likely that many of the figures have dual identities, each representing a figure from antiquity but depicted with the facial features of one of

Raphael's contemporaries, creating a bold visual claim that the Renaissance had matched the achievements of the Classical world.

Unit 14: Leonardo da Vinci, *The Last Supper*, 1495-98

The Last Supper is a mural painted on the wall of the refectory, or dining hall, of the convent of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan. It's considered one of the most recognizable works of art in the world, prized for its masterful handling of space, movement, and the distinct and individual emotions on each apostle's face. It was commissioned by Ludovico Sforza, Duke of Milan, and Leonardo spent nearly three years completing it. According to a well-known story, the prior of the convent grew impatient with how slowly the work was progressing and complained to the duke. Leonardo reportedly replied that he was struggling to find a face wicked enough for Judas, but that if the prior was in such a hurry, he could simply use the prior's own face instead.

Rather than showing the apostles lined up in a static row, with Judas separated on the opposite side of the table, as earlier artists typically did, Leonardo captures the single dramatic instant right after Christ announces that one of them will betray him, and each apostle reacts with his own distinct burst of shock, denial, anger, or grief. Leonardo groups the twelve men into four clusters of three, using their gestures and glances to draw the eye continually back to the calm, still figure of Christ at the center. Christ himself is the vanishing point for the perspective in the composition. He does not have a traditional halo, but the window in front of which he sits frames his head like a square halo - traditionally used to depict a holy person still living. The group immediately to the left of Christ shows Judas (bag of gold in one hand, other hand outstretched to both bread and dish), Peter (bearded to show his age, knife in one hand - the knife he will later use in the Garden of Gethsemane), and John - beardless, to show his youth.

Leonardo preferred oil paint to traditional fresco, and rather than painting quickly onto wet plaster as fresco required, he experimented with an unusual technique of tempera and gesso applied to a dry wall. This let him work slowly and revise as he went, but it was structurally unstable; combined with damp conditions in the newly built room and heat from the kitchen next door, the painting began deteriorating almost immediately. By 1556, less than sixty years after it was finished, one observer described it as already "a muddle of blots." It suffered further from neglect and clumsy restoration attempts over the centuries. A doorway was even cut straight through the bottom of the wall (removing Christ's feet from the composition). The room was used as a stable by Napoleon's troops in 1796, who reportedly threw stones at the wall and scratched out the apostles' eyes. The room flooded in 1800, and part of it served as a prison in the 1820s, and was damaged, despite attempts to protect it with sandbags, by Allied bombing in World War II. A massive, painstaking restoration completed in 1999 finally stabilized the painting in a climate-controlled room, and visitors today are admitted only in strictly timed fifteen-minute slots.

Unit 15: Leonardo da Vinci, *Mona Lisa (La Gioconda)*, 1503-1519

Considered the archetypal masterpiece of the Italian Renaissance, the *Mona Lisa* has been called the best known, most visited, most written about, most sung about, and most parodied artwork in the world. Its enduring fame rests on several innovations: the sitter's enigmatic, faintly amused expression, the monumental scale of a simple portrait, the extraordinarily subtle modeling of light and shadow across her face, and the hazy, atmospheric landscape behind her.

Painted in oil on a wood panel, the portrait depicts Lisa del Giocondo, wife of a wealthy Florentine silk merchant. "Mona" is a shortened form of "Madonna," the Italian title for a lady, (just as "Ma'am" is short for "Madam" in English). The alternate title, "La Gioconda," means "the joyful one" or "the happy one," a pun on the sitter's married name. It is among the earliest Renaissance portraits to place its subject within an imagined, continuous landscape rather than in front of a flat background. By setting the horizon at eye level rather than lower, Leonardo immerses the viewer's gaze directly into the misty, dreamlike scenery, heightening the painting's sense of mystery. This effect is amplified by Leonardo's famous *sfumato* technique, in which edges and outlines are softened into imperceptibly blurred transitions rather than sharp lines.

X-ray examination has revealed several earlier layers beneath the surface, including one version in which the sitter wore a pearl headdress. The painting may never have been fully finished; Leonardo kept it with him for years and left it in his will to his apprentice Salai. It was later purchased by King Francis I of France and has belonged to the Louvre's collection since 1797.

In 1911, an Italian handyman named Vincenzo Peruggia working at the Louvre stole the painting, believing that the great Italian masterpiece belonged in Italy rather than France. He hid overnight in a broom closet, removed the painting after the museum closed, and simply walked out the next morning with it hidden under his coat. Its disappearance made headlines around the world, and the theft only increased the painting's fame; it was recovered two years later when Peruggia tried to sell it to the director of the Uffizi Gallery in Florence. The painting has since survived several attacks, including thrown rocks, acid, red paint, and even a piece of cake, and today it hangs behind bulletproof glass.

Unit 16: Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Creation of Adam*, 1508-1512

The Sistine Chapel was built between 1477 and 1480 for Pope Sixtus IV, from whom it takes its name. It was designed to echo the exact proportions given for the Temple of Solomon in the Old Testament, roughly 40 cubits long by 20 cubits wide, so that the chapel itself was meant to evoke the ancient Jewish Temple. Its ceiling was originally painted a simple blue, scattered with gold stars, until Pope Julius II, sometimes called the "Warrior Pope" for his aggressive military campaigns, decided it needed something grander and pressed Michelangelo into the job. Michelangelo was reluctant; he considered himself primarily a sculptor, not a painter, and initially suggested his rival Raphael for the commission instead. The pope insisted, and Michelangelo set to work, tearing down the scaffolding that had already been built (it required drilling holes into the ceiling) in favor of his own freestanding design. Unable to find assistants he trusted with the work, he painted nearly the entire ceiling himself, standing upright on a raised scaffolding platform with his head craned backward and his arm extended overhead for hours at a stretch, not lying flat on his back as popular legend often claims. He complained about the physical toll in a wry sonnet to a friend, describing his beard pointing at the sky, paint dripping into his face, and his body twisted "like a Syrian bow". The finished project was staggering in scope, totaling over 300 individual figures across the ceiling including prophets and other Biblical figures as well as pagan sibyls believed to have foretold the coming of Christ. The ceiling was immediately hailed as a masterpiece.

It is not known whether Michelangelo designed the ceiling's complex theological program himself or was guided by advisors, but the overall theme traces humanity's Creation and Fall, building the case for humankind's need for a redeeming covenant with God, a theme echoed in scenes of Moses and Christ painted on the chapel's side walls. The Creation of Adam, the most famous of the ceiling's nine central Genesis scenes, shows a languid Adam reclining on a hillside as God reaches toward him in a great burst of energy and motion. God's arm is shown fully extended, his finger outstretched and ready, while Adam's own arm and hand remain relaxed and only partly lifted, as though he has not yet summoned the will to complete the gesture. The famous three-quarter-inch gap between their two fingers captures the instant just before the spark of life passes between them, and many art historians read it as a subtle statement about human free will: God's grace is fully offered, but man must still reach out and choose to receive it. Just behind God's other arm, the figure of Eve looks out with quiet apprehension, already anticipating the Fall to come.

The Sistine Chapel is the room in which the College of Cardinals gathers for a Papal Conclave to elect a new pope. Centuries of candle smoke and incense gradually darkened the ceiling; a major cleaning and restoration completed in the 1990s revealed colors far brighter and more vivid than anyone had seen for generations.

Unit 17: Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Pietà*, 1498-1499

This marble statue, showing a grieving Mary cradling the crucified body of Christ across her lap, was originally carved for the tomb of a French cardinal in Rome, Jean de Bilhères. Michelangelo deliberately minimized the marks of Christ's suffering; the nail wounds and the spear wound in his side are quite small, and his face shows no sign of pain. Michelangelo wrote that he wanted the sculpture to be "the heart's image," moving to look at, but also beautiful. Mary, notably, appears far too young to be the mother of a thirty-three-year-old man; many art historians believe this was intentional, her youthful face symbolizing her eternal purity and freedom from sin. The proportions of the figures are also deliberately distorted; if Mary were to stand up, she would tower over Christ, but this exaggerated scale was necessary to arrange a full-grown man's body gracefully across a seated woman's lap.

This is the only work Michelangelo ever signed. According to a well-known story, he overheard a visitor to the sculpture attributing it to a different, lesser-known artist, and in a fit of pride, snuck back that night and carved into the sash across Mary's chest: "MICHELANGELOUS BONAROTUS FLORENTINUS FACIEBAT," meaning "Michelangelo Buonarroti, the Florentine, made this." He reportedly regretted the outburst of vanity soon after and vowed never to sign another work again.

The *Pietà* traveled to New York for the 1964-65 World's Fair, packed inside a specially designed crate built to float in case the ship sank, and fitted with its own emergency locator beacon and marker buoy in case of disaster at sea. It has remained in the Vatican, in Saint Peter's Basilica, ever since.

Unit 18: Hans Holbein the Younger, *Henry VIII*, 1537

Painted in oil, this portrait captures one of the most memorable and notorious monarchs of the era. Henry VIII inherited the throne from his father, Henry VII, who had won the English crown from Richard III at the Battle of Bosworth in 1485, finally ending the decades long Wars of the Roses. Henry VII had four surviving children: Arthur, who married Catherine of Aragon and died shortly afterward; Henry, who later married his late brother's widow; and two daughters, Margaret and Mary, who were married off to the royal houses of Scotland and France.

Henry VIII is famous above all for his six wives, remembered with the rhyme "divorced, beheaded, died; divorced, beheaded, survived," as he tried for over two decades to ensure he would leave a male heir. In the process, he broke England away from the authority of the Pope, declared himself head of the Church of England, and ordered the dissolution of England's monasteries, seizing their vast wealth and land for the crown. He was succeeded first by his young son Edward VI, then by his daughter Mary I, and finally by his daughter Elizabeth I; since none of the three had children of their own, the throne passed after Elizabeth's death in 1603 to her cousin James of Scotland, uniting the crowns of England and Scotland.

Holbein was the leading portrait painter of the English court, and this image became the definitive visual record of Henry VIII, even though Holbein's original panel was destroyed in a fire at Whitehall Palace in 1698; the portrait survives today only through its many painted copies. Rather than showing Henry with the traditional symbols of kingship, a crown, scepter, or sword, Holbein conveys royal power entirely through the sheer richness of his clothing and jewelry, his wide, aggressive stance with hands planted firmly on his hips, and his direct, unflinching stare out at the viewer. Holbein's original preparatory drawing, or "cartoon," for this composition still survives and is held at the National Portrait Gallery in London.