Introduction

The medieval period, also called the Middle Ages, took place from about the 5th century to the 14th century. Most medieval art was made for churches and depicted Christian stories. The Renaissance began in Italy and occurred in the 15th and 16th centuries. Renaissance means “rebirth,” which refers to the revival of ancient Roman and Greek architecture, literature, and learning during this period.

Three important changes occurred in art from the medieval to the Renaissance periods—the evolving role of the artist from craftsman to independent artist; a more widespread incorporation of secular subjects into works of art, particularly mythological subjects; and the development of individual artistic styles and techniques. Think about these changes as you examine the following works of art.

Additional

Explore Galleries 155 and 156 to make connections and see relationships between Greek and Roman elements and Renaissance elements, such as the focus on the ideal human form, Greek myths, and Greek and Roman hairstyles.
The altar piece shows the Adoration of the Magi, or kings, from the Christian story about three kings who journeyed, following a star, to bring gifts to the newborn Christ Child. This story was so important to the artist that he included it twice.

**FIND EACH DEPICTION.**
- How are they different?
- Does the artist connect them in any way?
- Why do think this painting is so big?
- Where do you think it was originally placed?

The Ayala Altarpiece is made up of 15 scenes that show the story of Christ’s life. Each scene is accompanied by words found in the borders and separated or framed by columns. This format might suggest to us how comic strips are laid out.

**The Ayala Altarpiece: Diagram of the Sequence of Narratives**

**Above the altar**
1. Saint Blaise blessing Chancellor Ayala and his son
2. The Annunciation
3. The Visitation
4. The Nativity and Annunciation to the Shepherds
5. Throne, possibly intended to frame/hold a reliquary of the Virgin and Child
6. The Three Kings
7. The Presentation of Christ in the Temple
8. The Flight into Egypt
9. Saint Thomas Aquinas blessing Doña Leonor de Guzmán and her daughter-in-law
10. Jesus disputing with the Elders in the Temple
11. The Wedding at Cana
12. The Resurrection
13. The Crucifixion
14. The Ascension of Christ
15. Pentecost
16. The Assumption of the Virgin

**On the altar frontal**
17. The Annunciation to the Shepherds
18. The Adoration of the Magi

**Northern Spanish**

*The Ayala Altarpiece,*
commissioned 1396
Tempera on panel (1928.817)
The altarpiece was made more than 600 years ago for a Spanish nobleman named Don Pedro López de Ayala to be placed in his funerary chapel. Wearing clothes of the time, Don Pedro and his son appear in one scene.

Can you find them?

Don Pedro’s wife and daughter-in-law appear in a different scene.

Can you locate them?

Don Pedro’s grandchildren appear in still another scene.

Can you find them?

The family’s coat of arms appears in the surrounding frame. The shield with two standing wolves represents Don Pedro’s family, and the two kettles represent the family of Don Pedro’s wife, Dona Leonor de Guzmán. The artist who painted this altarpiece is unknown. During medieval times, many works of art were left unsigned because art was considered a craft, much like carpentry or metalsmithing. It was not until the Renaissance that artists regularly began signing their work and became widely recognized for their individual creative talents.

How is this Spanish artist telling this story?

How are the scenes organized?

Which scenes does the artist want us to focus on?

Do some seem unclear?

Are any repeated? Where?

What do you think the scenes are about?

What tells you this?

How does the artist show indoor space?

How does the artist show outdoor space?

What kind of architecture does the artist show?

Activity

In the spaces below, sketch a story using a series of different scenes as the artist of The Ayala Altarpiece did.

How will you connect your scenes?

How might you use text within the scenes?

If characters are repeated, how will you convey that to your viewers?
In the medieval social system called feudalism, the horse soldier, called a knight, wore armor. The knight was granted lands and the services of tenants who lived on and worked his land in exchange for his loyalty to a king or nobleman. Beginning in the 15th century, a more modern form of government gradually replaced feudalism. The knight’s role as a powerful combatant was reduced and replaced with foot soldiers. Even as the military role of the knight declined, his ceremonial importance increased.

A garniture is a collection of armor pieces that could be added or removed depending on how the knight intended to use it. The Art Institute’s example was made when the design of the garniture was mechanically and functionally perfect. This garniture is made of 24 parts, a small number compared to some made of more than 80 pieces. Each piece had its own purpose, yet was designed to harmonize structurally and artistically with the other pieces. For greater mobility, only half-armor was used during battle on foot and three-quarters armor was used for sporting events like jousting, a tournament where men ride horseback with lances aimed toward the opponent. The winner is the man who first knocks his opponent off his horse.

Various materials were used for armor, including sheets of leather, bone, and scales, but by the mid-13th century, armormers determined that metals such as iron and steel were most effective. In its entirety this garniture weighs more than 34 pounds.

Kings and noblemen often wore highly decorated armor to show off their wealth and rank. This garniture is highly decorative and includes symmetrical and intertwining lines that were etched, or scratched, into the surface. Mythological figures representing important traits or qualities can be seen in the large medallions on the shoulders, breastplate, and shoulder plate.

Diagram of Three-Quarter Field Armor

- **A. helmet:** defense for the head
- **B. gorget:** component that protected the throat and upper torso, covering the gap between the top of the torso armor and the base of the helmet
- **C. breastplate:** plate armor for the torso, reaching just below the waist
- **D. lance rest:** shock-absorbing bracket used in conjunction with the wooden spear called a lance, and fastened to right side of the breastplate, below the arm
- **E. pauldrons:** defenses for the shoulder and uppermost part of the arms
- **F. vambrace:** armor for the upper and lower arm, linked together by a cowter (elbow armor) at the elbow
- **G. gauntlets:** glove-like defenses for the hands
- **H. tassets:** defenses of iron or steel plates attached to the bottom edge of the torso armor, to protect the front of the hips and upper thighs
- **I. cuisses:** thigh armor
- **J. poleyns:** usually worn attached to the cuisses to protect the knees
Bernat Martorell, one of the greatest Spanish artists of his time, was from Catalonia, a kingdom in the northeastern region of present-day Spain. This panel was one part of an altarpiece in a Catholic church. It was meant to inspire and instruct worshippers, most of whom were illiterate.

The legend of Saint George features a dragon that lived near the town of Silena, in present-day north Africa. The dragon poisoned passersby with his noxious breath. To calm him, the people of Silena made daily sacrifices of two sheep. When the town ran out of sheep, the king decided to sacrifice one sheep and one youth or maiden, who was chosen by lottery. The princess was soon chosen and was sent to face her fate. George, a knight, came to town and offered to kill the dragon and save the princess if the townspeople promised to convert to Christianity.

This painting shows the moment when Saint George is about to kill the dragon while the townspeople watch from a typical medieval castle surrounded by a moat, or water barrier. Although the story of Saint George dates to the third century, the characters are dressed in clothing of the artist’s time. Saint George wears a complete set of armor called l’arnés blanc (lar-NAY blahnk), or “white armor,” a style ordered to be made for knights by the Catalan counselors who commissioned and paid for this painting of the patron saint of Catalonia.
This tondo, or “round painting,” shows the Christian story of the Adoration of the Magi. The story focuses on three kings who went to Bethlehem (south of Jerusalem) to present gifts to the newborn Christ Child. Jesus and Mary are shown greeting the magi on the steps of a building modeled after ancient Greek and Roman ruins. The artist copied the architecture from the ruins of a Roman basilica (house of worship) thought to have been the Temple of Peace.

The animals shown in the painting have various meanings. The peacock represents eternal life, which is connected to the Christian belief that Christ’s followers will have eternal life. The artist may have seen apes and giraffes in Florence because of the Renaissance interest in the exotic. A giraffe was sent as a gift to Lorenzo de’ Medici, ruler of Florence and a great patron of the arts, in 1487 from the sultan of Egypt. The dwarf shown at right and in the center is notable because they were often employed in Renaissance courts as entertainers and took part in processions. It is very possible that images of dwarfs like this one were actual portraits. The figures in the painting wear contemporary clothing combined with togas to demonstrate the meeting of Renaissance Florence with the Classical world.

This painting marks a clear break from medieval-style painting because of its Classical elements and its use of perspective.

**COMPARISON**

**DEPICTION of the Adoration story**

**FIGURES**

**DEPICTION of space or depth**

**LOCATION it was created for (This painting was made for someone’s home.)**

Italian artists developed an important technique known as linear perspective. Objects are painted using a system of converging lines that creates a sense of three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional surface. The place where the lines meet is called the vanishing point.

- **Where is the vanishing point in this painting?**

- **Describe the scene.**

- **What exotic animals do you see?**

- **How do you think this Italian artist knew what these animals looked like at this time?**

Attributed to RAFFELLO BOTTICINI (Italian, 1477–c. 1520)

*Adoration of the Magi, 1495*  
Tempera on panel (1937.997)
Concluding Activity

Renaissance artists often used Greek and Roman mythology as inspiration for their artworks, sometimes even depicting the gods and scenes from myths.

Divide the class into smaller groups and have each group pick one of the following paintings to discuss.

Each group should think about the following questions when investigating their artworks.

Groups may then present their discussions to the entire class.

**DESCRIBE THE CHARACTERS.**

- What are they doing?
- How did the artist depict the action of the story?

**DESCRIBE WHAT YOU KNOW ABOUT THE CHARACTERS PORTRAYED IN THIS PAINTING.**

- How did the artist portray emotions in the figures?
- Where does the artist place the figures in relation to the rest of the scene?
- Are the characters located in a recognizable place?
- How do the colors of the painting help express a mood or feeling?

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Jacopo Bassano da Ponte (Italian, c. 1510–1592)
*Diana and Actalor*, c. 1585/92
Oil on canvas (1939.2239)

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Jacopo Robusti (Tintoretto) (Italian, 1518–1594)
*Tarquin and Lucretia*, 1580/90
Oil on canvas (1949.203)

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Luca Cambiaso (Italian, 1527–1585)
*Venus and Cupid*, c. 1570
Oil on canvas (1942.290)

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Italian
*Hercules and Lichas*, c. 1600/25
Bronze (1968.613)

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Italian
*Hercules and Lichas*, c. 1600/25
Bronze (1968.612)