

# Title of the Teaching Unit

“Italian and Northern European Renaissance Painting”

## Level

CEFR: B1/B2

## Grade, type of school and course

4th year of a secondary school specialising in scientific subjects

## Pre-requisites

The students are familiar with:

- the basic structures and verb tenses of the English language
- some specific lexis related to Art introduced and revised throughout the year
- approaching the analysis of a painting/work of art on the basis of the historical background, the main features of the artistic period and the main techniques adopted by the artist.
- various exercise typologies such as fill in the gaps, scrambled texts, matching, clozes, reading and listening comprehensions, videos, etc..
- collaborative tasks such as group and pair work

## Objectives

Intended knowledge and competence outcomes:

- be aware of the connection between the language used and the content in the target subject, that is Art
- interpret visual elements
- be able to recognise the main features of the Renaissance period, Renaissance paintings and techniques, and adopt the proper art vocabulary to describe them.
- be able to compare the main features and traits of the Italian and Northern European Renaissance Art.

## Interdisciplinary links

Art, English, History.

## Teaching Approach

**Communicative.** The students will be engaged in different kinds of activities specifically meant to encourage their participation and use of the target language in the classroom.

## Target class

22 students aged 17  
Mixed ability class with no special needs students

## Teaching Aids

IWB, blackboard, copies made from books, images and videos taken from the Internet so as to match the students' different learning styles.

## Duration

2 hours

## Class dynamics

Individual, pair and group - work, dialogic teacher to student interaction.

# LESSON 1

# ACTIVITY 1

(5 minutes)

## WARM UP:

What do you mean when you think about

*Renaissance* ?

Try to write some words about it .

(in pairs and all together)

# Activity 2

## Step 1

Lead-in activity: try to guess and test your knowledge! (5 minutes)

1 a) Who, among the following, are Renaissance painters? Spot them.

Brunelleschi

Gian Lorenzo  
Bernini

Piero della Francesca

Giotto

Masaccio

Antonio Canova

1 b) Match the artist (a to d) with his painting (1 to 4)

1



2



3



4



a

Uccello, *The Battle of San Romano*, London.

b

Botticelli, *The Birth of the Venus*, Uffizi Gallery, Florence.

c

Masaccio, *Holy Trinity*, Florence.

d

Perugino, *Delivery of the Keys to St. Peter*, Sistine Chapel, Vatican City, Rome

## Activity 2

# Italian Renaissance Painting: reading comprehension (20 minutes)

### Step 2 (15 minutes)

“Renaissance Italy” – Listen to the text while following on your worksheet, then answer these questions.

- 1) What did Italian painters and sculptors of the early fifteenth century focus on?
- 2) In what way did their work differ from the work of Flemish artists?

### Step 3 (5 minutes)

Match each term from the text to its definition:

1. linear perspective
2. orthogonal
3. tone
4. vanishing point
5. atmospheric perspective
6. *trompe l'oeil*

- a. the degree of brightness or darkness in a painting
- b. a manner of representation involving realistic imagery in order to create the optical illusion that the depicted object exist.
- c. method of rendering the effect of spatial distance by subtle variations in colour, clarity, and tone.
- d. any line perpendicular to the imagined picture plane.
- e. method used in drawing and painting in which parallel lines are represented as converging to give the illusion of depth and distance.
- f. the point on the horizon line at which orthogonals meet.



## Read the text and fill in the gaps using the right words. (15 minutes)

**celebration**

**medals**

**dynastic**

**painted**

**enhanced**

**patronage**

**flourished**

**produced**

**liberality**

**to  
embellish**

**magnificent**

**treatises**

**masterpieces**

During the Renaissance a wealth of works of art was ..... at the will of princes, dukes and Signori that ruled ..... courts throughout Italy. These rulers were persuaded that money spent on art and architecture was money spent for the public good and ..... their own prestige.

Moreover, artistic ..... was aimed at conveying the idea of the stability and peacefulness of the State, whose lord was free from his enemies and could devote himself ..... his dominions with beautiful ..... Besides, the frequent enrolment of artists who had worked for the previous lord was a means of emphasizing ..... continuity.

But art was mainly intended as a means of personal power and soon the idea of magnificence was linked to the ..... of the prince's virtues. From the XV century onwards, in fact, a great deal of ..... were written to underline the traditional virtues of piety, charity, justice, fortitude, prudence, temperance and ..... that the prince was expected to possess. This accounts for the incessant commissions of cycle of frescoes, portraits, ....., tapestries, illuminated manuscripts and so on which ..... inside the Italian courts: think of the frescoes ..... in the Camera Picta, or Painted Room, in the north tower of Castel San Giorgio in Mantua which were meant to celebrate the court of Ludovico II Gonzaga.



# Activity 4

## Jigsaw Activity

(15 minutes)

Unscramble the sentences to rearrange the description of *The Birth of Venus* by Sandro Botticelli. Look at the painting for help.

Many artists active during the last third of the XV century continued to explore nature and

the human body on a scientific basis, as well

as relying on poetic and fantastic subject matter inspired

by myths and allegories. Botticelli's paintings, commissioned by a member of the

rich and powerful family of the Medici, provides an

example of a scene based on traditional mythology. Venus emerges

from the sea on a

shell which is driven to the shore by flying

gods of wind amidst a shower of roses. As she is about

to step onto the land, one of the Hours receives

her with a purple cloak. To these scholars the goddess' birth was the symbol

of the mystery through which the divine message of beauty came into the world. This secular work was painted onto

canvas, which was a less expensive painting surface

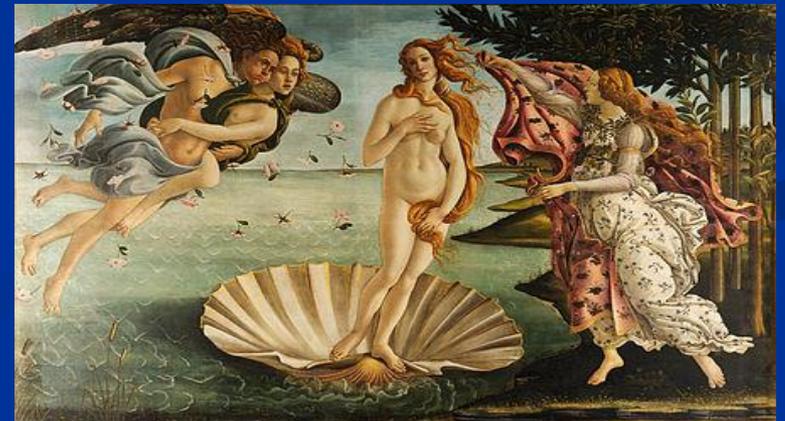
than the wooden panels used in church and court pictures. Two gods of wind are depicted on the top left hand

side with limbs entwined as to

form a unique figure: the male figure is blowing vigorously while the female

figure delicately sighs a warm breath that leads Venus ashore. They are surrounded by falling roses bearing a golden heart, created at Venus' birth. Botticelli

portrays Venus in the very moment when, drawn by the shell, she lands in Cyprus.



Sandro Botticelli, *The Birth of Venus* (c. 1486). [Tempera](#) on canvas. 172.5 cm × 278.9 cm (67.9 in × 109.6 in).

[Uffizi](#), Florence

# Homework

Answer the questions provided below.

## *The Birth of Venus (Uffizi Gallery, Florence)*

Many artists active during the last third of the XV century continued to explore nature and the human body on a scientific basis, as well as relying on poetic and fantastic subject matter inspired by myths and allegories. Botticelli's painting, commissioned by a member of the rich and powerful family of the Medici, provides an example of a scene based on traditional mythology.

Venus emerges from the sea on a shell which is driven to the shore by flying gods of wind amidst a shower of roses. As she is about to step on to the land, one of the Hours receives her with a purple cloak.

To these scholars the goddess' birth was the symbol of the mystery through which the divine message of beauty came into the world.

This secular work was painted onto canvas, which was a less expensive painting surface than the wooden panels used in church and court pictures.

Two gods of wind are depicted on the top left hand side with limbs entwined as to form a unique figure: the male figure is blowing vigorously, while the female figure delicately sighs a warm breath that leads Venus ashore. They are surrounded by falling roses bearing a golden heart, which were created at Venus' birth.

The nymph is likely to be identified with one of the three Hours', Greek goddesses of the seasons, who were attendants to Venus, as her lavishly decorated robes embroidered with red and white daisies, yellow primroses, and blue cornflowers seem to suggest.

Botticelli portrays Venus (generated when the Titan Cronus castrated his father, the god Uranus) in the very moment when, having been drawn by the shell, she lands in Cyprus.

1. What were the most frequent subjects in painting in the last decades of the XV century?
2. What type of subject does *The Birth of Venus* belong to?
  1. How is the goddess represented?
  1. Does the representation of Venus' birth have a hidden meaning?
  1. What other figures are included in the painting?

# Renaissance Art in Northern Europe

## LESSON 2

### Lead-in activity (5 minutes)

Read the following introductory paragraph and then complete the map with the missing place-names on the right.

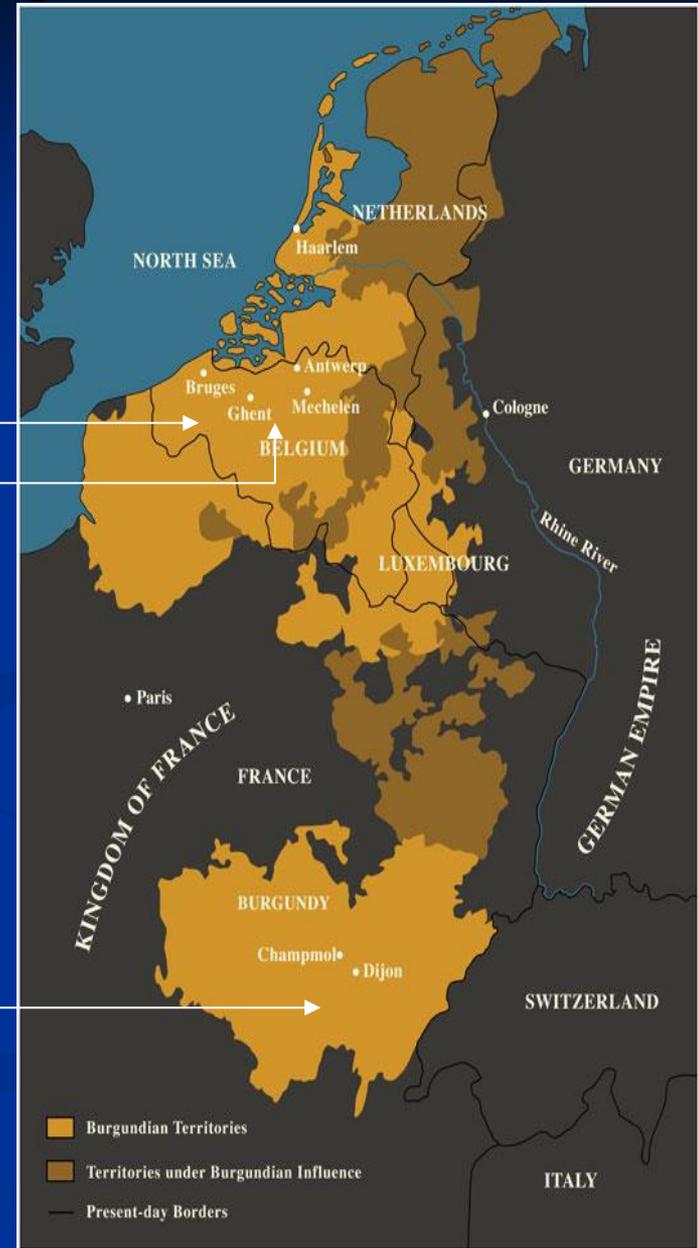
In the 15th century, the northern European countries we know today as Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg were controlled by the enormously wealthy Dukes of Burgundy (Burgundy is a region in France). The court of the Dukes of Burgundy were the most important patrons of the early Northern Renaissance, but newly wealthy private citizens also commissioned art as part of a growing interest in private meditation and prayer. Portraits were also commissioned in growing numbers. Like Florence, cities in Northern Europe (Bruges, Ghent and then later Antwerp and Brussels), were rich industrial and banking centers during this period and this allowed a large merchant-class to flourish creating an ideal environment for artistic production.

Beaune    Flanders  
Brussels

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_



Read the text and spot those words that have the following meaning (a to j):

Whereas Italian artists favoured tempera, and used it almost exclusively for panel painting until the end of the fifteenth century, Flemish artists preferred oil paints, which are created by suspending powdered pigments in linseed – and occasionally- walnut oil. Tempera had to be applied in a very precise manner because it dried almost as quickly as it was laid down. The versatility of oil paint made it an essential factor in realizing the new artistic vision of early Flemish painting, which combined extraordinary realism with brilliant colour. Admixture in oils makes most pigments translucent, allowing artists to apply their colours in thin layers, or glazes, thereby generating the rich, glowing reds and greens seen for example in the *Arnolfini Portrait* by Jan van Eyck. Oil paint is highly flexible in that it admits application both in thick impasto and fine detail: countless types of descriptive brushstroke are possible in oil. Since it is slow drying, it can be carefully blended to make soft, seamless shadows essential for the suggestion of three-dimensional form, as well as worked while still wet. All these properties make it especially suitable to communicate the reflective properties of different surfaces, from polished marble to dazzling jewels, from soft velvet to luminous highlights on hard metal plate. Similarly, the oil medium is able to imitate convincingly fleeting effects of rippling, transparent water or moving clouds. In stark contrast, the medium of egg tempera was traditional in Southern Europe. In 1464 the Italian architect Filarete expressed admiration for the Flemish oil technique specifically. Hints of interest among Southern European artists are evident well before this: the use of oil by the Ferrarese painter Cosmè Tura in the late 1450s suggests study of the technique of Rogier van der Weyden, whose works were collected by Tura's patron, Leonello d'Este. In Naples, Niccolò Colantonio had adopted an oil technique by about 1445, perhaps as a result of links with the Flemish artist Bartélemy d'Eyck, who in all likelihood had been in the city around 1440, and who was possibly related to Jan van Eyck. Colantonio himself may have taught the Sicilian Antonello da Messina, whose experiments in oil were matched by his proficiency in rendering minute detail in the Flamish fashion.

a. particolare

b. pennellata

c. mischiato,  
fuso

d. ombre

e.  
abbagliante

f.  
Fiammingo

g. superfici

h. strati

i. in polvere

j.  
miscela

Watch the video introducing the famous “*Arnolfini portrait*” by Jan van Eyck at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ODhKqFaugQ> Then correct the mistakes in the sentences below.

- 1) It represents a wedding taking place
- 2) The man was an Italian doctor working in Bruges and his wealth is reflected in the necklace he is wearing
- 3) The shoes being off have a symbolic meaning; they refer to a legal event
- 4) The single candle in the chandelier may refer to the presence of an important authority in the house
- 5) There are people situated in the doorway and we see this in the painting behind their shoulders
- 6) There are little roundels around the mirror representing scenes about the Creation from the Bible
- 7) The painting shows scarce attention to the details
- 8) It is clear that the woman is pregnant
- 9) Jan van Eyck’s oil painting is particularly luminous due to the application of dull, single layers which give birth to deep and rich colours
- 10) The love of textures, tempera as well as the correct use of perspective tell us we are in the Northern rather than in the Italian Renaissance



**Jan van Eyck, Giovanni Arnolfini and his wife, 1434 (oil on wood; 32" x 23"),** The National Gallery, London.

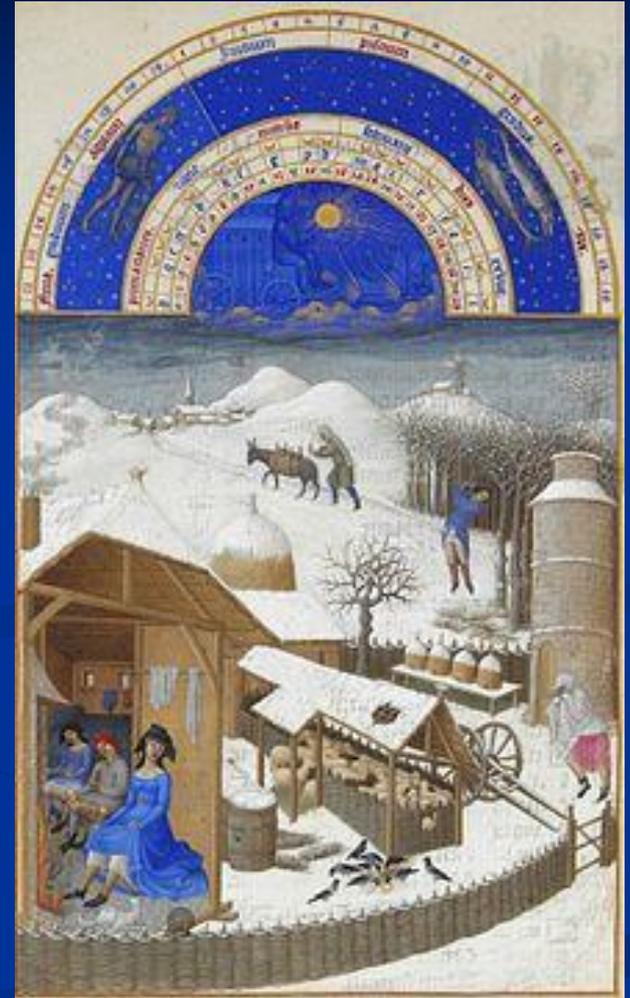
# Activity 4

## Spoken Practice: describing a painting

(10 minutes)

Work in pairs. Use the following key-words/sentences as prompts to describe the painting on the right.

- scene from everyday life
- peasants' labours
- largest in scale, elegantly dressed
- overgarment / daintily lifting with both hands
- relax before a blazing fire
- lower-class couple / smaller/ in the background
- less expensive clothing / less well behaved
- share the fire



Pol, Herman, and Jean Limbourg, **February**, from the *Très riches heures of Jean, Duc de Berry*, 1411-1416, colours and ink on parchment, Musée Condé, Chantilly, France.

# Homework

Read the passage and match the sentence halves provided below.

## Northern portraits

As in Italy, the regions of Northern Europe attributed several important functions to portraiture of living as well as dead people.

Most of the commissions came from the nobility, who wanted to be remembered and legitimated. But soon also the merchant bourgeoisie equally required portraits to commemorate their activity or special events of their lives.

Aristocratic portraits were often portable, in order to be shown whenever necessary. These were painted on both sides since the back came to be dedicated to the noble person's coat-of-arms.

Ladies were represented mostly along with clothes and ornaments that referred to their social status, they were physically located and sometimes an early interest in emotions appears in their acute or pensive gazes.

On the whole, gestures, body positions and facial expressions seem stereotyped and limited and men are given a place of honour. In a triptych such as the altarpiece painted by Hugo van der Goes for the Portinari family, the male protagonists are positioned on the right of the holy figures, while women are confined to the left hand side.



Hugo van der Goes, *Adoration of the Shepherds (Portinari Triptych)*, ca 1479, detail.  
Oil on panel, 253x568 cm. Uffizi Gallery, Florence.

1. Numerous portraits were commissioned by the aristocrats, eager
2. Northern merchants wanted to be portrayed as well
3. Portraits of noblemen could be easily moved and
4. Women's portraits were characterised by objects
5. There still persisted hierarchic differences between men and women

- a. to enhance their function or to remember important occasions.
- b. that referred to the lady's social status.
- c. underlined by their position in the painting.
- d. were generally matched by their armourial symbols on the rear.
- e. to leave a memory of their status and power to posterity.