EARLY NORTHERN RENAISSANCE
15th Century Northern Renaissance
Top Ten Things to Know for

NORTHERN RENAISSANCE

- Did not have classical antiquity as inspiration
- Interest in symbolism
- Also interested in observing nature and landscapes
- Was NOT connected to Italian art, BUT the Italian influence was strong.
- Painting in OIL, developed in Flanders, was widely adopted in Italy.
- The differences between the two cultures:
  - ITALY → change was inspired by humanism with its emphasis on the revival of the values of classical antiquity.
  - NORTHERN EUROPE → change was driven by religious reform, the return to Christian values, and the revolt against the authority of the Church.
- Both royalty and merchants were patrons of artists – not just the Church.
- More emphasis on middle-class and peasant life.
- Details of domestic interiors.
- Great skill in portraiture.
The *Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry* or simply the *Très Riches Heures* (*The Very Rich Hours of the Duke of Berry*) is a richly decorated Book of Hours (containing prayers to be said by the faithful at each of the canonical hours of the day) commissioned by Jean, Duke of Berry, around 1410.

It illustrates the various seasonal tasks throughout the various months.

**Limbourg Brothers**

*Tres Riches Heures* (Very Rich Hours), 1413-1416.
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September  Harvesting grapes  

December  Wild boar hunt
Jean, Duke de Berry
(featured on January’s page)
Melchior Broederlam

Annunciation and Visitation and Presentation and Flight into Egypt, 1399.
Robert Campin, Merode Altarpiece (open), 1425

Similar in format to large-scale Flemish altarpieces, The Merode altarpiece is much smaller, which allowed the owners to close the wings and move the painting when necessary.

The artist depicted a well-kept middle-class Flemish home as the site of the event. Both the architectural scene in the background of the right wing and the included accessories such as furniture, utensils, etc, reinforce the settings identification. These objects also function as symbols.
Robert Campin, Merode Altarpiece (open), 1425

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The central panel depicts the popular Annunciation theme in which the archangel Gabriel approaches Mary, who sits reading.

The book, extinguished candle, lilies, copper basin (in the corner niche), towels, fire screen, and bench symbolize, in different ways, the Virgin’s purity and her divine mission.

In the right panel, Joseph has made a mousetrap, symbolic of the theological tradition that Christ is bait set in the trap of the world to catch the Devil.

In the left panel the altarpiece’s donor, Peter Inghelbrecht and his wife kneel and watch in awe of this momentous event.

The couple appear in a closed garden which symbolizes Mary’s purity and the flowers represent Mary’s virtues, especially humility.
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Robert Campin, Merode Altarpiece (open), 1425.
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Merode Altarpiece (details)
This polyptych is one of the largest and most admired Flemish altarpieces of the fifteenth century.

This piece functioned as the liturgical (A prescribed form or set of forms for public religious worship) centerpiece of the endowment established in the chapel Vyd and Borluut built in the local church dedicated to Saint John the Baptist.

Two of the exterior panels at the bottom depict the donors. The husband and wife kneel with their hands clasped in prayer as they gaze at illusionistic stone sculptures of Ghent’s patron saints: Saint John the Baptist and Saint John the Evangelist.

An Annunciation scene appears on the upper register, with a careful representation of a Flemish town outside the center panel’s painted window. In the uppermost arched panels, van Eyck depicted images of the Old Testament prophets Zachariah
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Jan Van Eyck, Ghent Altarpiece (open), 1432
Jan Van Eyck, Giovanni Arnolfini and His Bride, 1434.

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Van Eyck depicted the Lucca financier and his betrothed in a Flemish bedchamber that is simultaneously mundane and charged with spirituality.

Almost every object conveys the event’s sanctity, specifically, the holiness of matrimony. Arnolfini and his bride, hand in hand, take the marriage of vows.

The cast-aside clogs indicate this event is taking place on holy ground.

The little dog symbolizes fidelity (the common canine name Fido originated from the Latin Fido, “to trust”).

The bedpost’s crowning ornament is a tiny statue of Saint Margaret, patron saint of childbirth.

From the finial hangs a whisk broom, symbolic of domestic care.

The oranges on the chest below the window may refer to fertility, and the all-seeing eye of God is seen by the single candle in the left rear holder of the chandelier.
Husbands traditionally presented brides with clogs, and the solitary lit candle in the chandelier was also part of Flemish marriage practices.

Van Eyck’s placement of the two figures suggests conventional gender roles - the woman stands near the bed and well into the room, while the man stands near the open window, symbolic of the outside world.

Van Eyck enhanced the documentary nature of this painting by exquisitely painting each object. He carefully distinguished textures and depicted the light from the window on the left reflecting off various surfaces.

The artist augmented the scene’s credibility by including the convex mirror, because viewers can see not only the principals, Arnolfini and his wife, but also two persons who look into the room through the door. The picture’s purpose seems to have been to record and sanctify this marriage.

Van Eyck was present, as noted in the writing in the mirror: “Johannes de Ecyk fuit hic.”
Jan Van Eyck, Giovanni Arnolfini and His Bride, 1434.

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The small medallions set into the mirror’s frame show tiny scenes from the Passion of Christ and represent God’s everpresent promise of salvation for the figures reflected on the mirror’s convex surface.

The artist augmented the scene’s credibility by including the convex mirror, because viewers can see not only the principals, Arnolfini and his wife, but also two persons who look into the room through the door.

One of these must be the artist himself, due to the florid inscription above the mirror “Johannes de Eyck fuit hic,” announcing he was present.
Jan Van Eyck,
Giovanni Arnolfini, 1430s

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Replica on London street (to show size)
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Arnolfini in pop culture...
Jan van Eyck, Man in a Red Turban 1433, Oil on wood.

Completely secular painting without a layer of religious interpretation. This absence of religious meaning was very uncommon in Flemish painting in this time.

Believed to be a self-portrait, it shows that this man had no religious purpose for being, only a personal one.

Private portraiture began to multiply as both artists and patrons became interested in the reality they revealed. The man in the painting looks directly at the viewers, perhaps like he was looking in the mirror. This was the 1st western portrait in a thousand years to have this.

The man in the painting has a level, composed gaze, directed from a three-quarter head pose, which showed that this man was very impressive in his day.

At any angle you look at the painting, it looks like it is staring right back at you. (much like the Mona Lisa!)
Rogier Van Der Weyden, *Deposition* from Notre-Dame hors-les-murs, 1435

This piece was the center panel of a triptych (three-paneled painting) the Archers’ Guild of Louvain commissioned for the church of Notre Dame hors-les-murs in Louvain.

This altarpiece sums up Rogier’s early style and content. Instead of creating a deep landscape setting, he compressed the figures and action onto a shallow stage to concentrate the observer’s attention.

The painting resembles a stratified relief carving. A series of lateral undulating movements gives the group a unity, a formal cohesion that Rogier strengthened by psychological means.

The depiction of the agony of loss is among the most authentic in religious art.
It was the center panel of a triptych, three paneled painting, of the Archers’ Guild of Lovain commissioned for the church of Notre Dame hors-les-murs in Louvain. To represent the patrons of this painting he uses the crossbow, the guild’s symbol, in the spandrels.

This altarpiece nicely sums up Rogier’s early style and content. He used a shallow stage instead of deep landscape setting. All of the characters are close together and there is little background space at all. A series of lateral undulating movements gives the group a unity, a formal cohesion that Rogier strengthened by psychological means- by the desolating anguish common to all the figures. The similar poses of Jesus and Mary further unify the painting. He is an amazing emotion painter. The sorrow on the faces of the characters is among the most authentic in religious art.

This is the sorrowful face of the Virgin Mary.
Deposition (details), Rogier Van Der Weyden, 1435.
Rogier Van der Weyden, *Annunciation Triptych*, 1440.

**EARLY NORTHERN RENAISSANCE**
Rogier Van Der Weyden, *St. Columba Altarpiece*, c. 1455. Oil on oak panel.
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Rogier Van Der Weyden,
St. Columba Altarpiece (details).
“Hail, full of grace…”

“Behold the handmaiden of the Lord.”
This painting, just like Van Eyck’s portrait, involves a couple and the holy sacrament of matrimony.

A goldsmith sits in his stall, showing an elegantly attired couple a selection of rings. The bride’s betrothal girdle lies on the table, and the woman reaches for the ring the goldsmith weighs.

The carefully depicted objects on the right side of the painting refer to the goldsmith’s trade. The raw materials - precious stones, beads, crystal, coral, and seed pearls - are scattered among finished products, including rings, buckles, and brooches. The convex mirror in the foreground extends the painting’s space into that of the viewer’s.

This painting incorporates secular and religious elements. While focusing on an economic transaction and the goldsmith’s profession, it calls attention to the sacrament of marriage and includes items such as a crystal container of Eucharistic wafers. The scales could easily symbolize the Last Judgment.
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Jan Van Eyck, Giovanni Arnolfini and His Bride, 1434.

Petrus Christus, A Goldsmith in His Shop, 1449
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Hugo van der Goes, Portinari Altarpiece, 1474-76.
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Hugo van der Goes, Portinari Altarpiece, 1474-76.
Dirk Bouts Last Supper (center panel of the Altarpiece of the Holy Sacrament), 1464-1468

This painting is the first northern one to use a **single vanishing point** for constructing an interior as he adjusts figures’ scale to correspond to the space they occupy. The perspective isn’t perfect however. The windows and side rooms do not adhere to the rules of linear perspective.

It was the first Flemish panel painting depicting this event. He didn’t focus on the biblical narrative itself but instead presented Christ in the role of a priest performing a ritual from the liturgy of the Christian Church.

This contrasts sharply with other Last supper depictions. The people depicted are most like portraits of the confraternity’s members responsible for commissioning the altarpiece.