

# Northern Renaissance art under Burgundian rule



We often think of the Renaissance as an entirely Italian phenomenon, but in northern Europe there was also a Renaissance. Though profoundly different, the Italian and Northern Renaissances shared a similar interest in the natural world and re-creating the illusion of reality in their paintings and sculptures.

In the fifteenth century, the northern European countries we know today

The Burgundian Netherlands (map: [National Gallery of Art](#))

as Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg were controlled by the enormously wealthy Dukes of Burgundy (Burgundy is a region in France). This region during the fifteenth century is often referred to, today, as the Burgundian Netherlands. 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.

## **Classical antiquity?**

In Italy, the Renaissance was deeply influenced by the art and culture of Ancient Greece and Rome—in part because the art and architecture of antiquity was more immediately available (ruins were plentiful in many cities). Northern Europe however did not have such ready access to ancient monuments and so tended to draw instead more directly from medieval traditions such as manuscript illuminations.

## **Oil paint: glazes**

Though the medium of oil paint had been in use since the late Middle Ages, the artists of the North more fully exploited this medium's unique characteristics. Using thin layers of paint, called glazes, northern artists created a depth of color that

was entirely new, and because oil paint can imitate textures far better than fresco or tempera, it was perfectly suited to representing the material reality that was so important to Renaissance artists and their patrons. In the Northern Renaissance, we see artists making the most of oil paint—creating the illusion of light reflecting on metal surfaces or jewels, and textures that appear like real fur, hair, wool or wood.

The great artists of this period created work that reflected their increasingly mercantile world, even when they worked for the court of the Dukes. The spiritual world reigned supreme but the representation of wealth and power were also a hugely important motive for patrons whether a pope, a duke, or a banker.

### **Additional resources:**

[Netherlandish Painting in the 1400s from the National Gallery of Art](#)

[Painting in Oil in the Low Countries and Its Spread to Southern Europe from The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Timeline of Art History](#)

[Burgundian Netherlands: Private Life from The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Timeline of Art History](#)

[Burgundian Netherlands: Court Life and Patronage from The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Timeline of Art History](#)

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