

LS 819 - Renaissance Italian Art in its Historical Context

Fall 2026

Thursday, 6:30 – 9:20 p.m. (Zoom)

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Have you ever wondered where Michelangelo's statue of David stood before it ended up in one of Florence's most crowded museums? Or why Renaissance artists used pagan mythology to communicate Christian themes? What happens when we view art and architecture in their original historical contexts? We'll take up these questions together as we reconstruct the worlds that created Renaissance Italian art (c. 1300 – 1600). To do this work, we need more than just imagination. We'll draw on a wealth of documents, texts, and works of scholarship; and using sophisticated digital images, we'll spend time in the close study of painting and sculpture, and buildings both public and private. In the first part of the course, "From Workshop to Wall," we explore the dynamics of artistic creation. We'll read passages from Leonardo's notebooks and recipes for making paints; we'll try our hand at one-point perspective; and we'll unpack the power relations in patron-artist contracts. In Part II, "Language Lessons," we'll take a crash course in the cultural vocabulary of the age — political, religious, social, and intellectual — and apply what we've learned to the artworks we study. Our aim: to step into the shoes of Renaissance contemporaries and see what they might have seen. Our class concludes with two case studies: Michelangelo, as sculptor, painter and architect; and the often overlooked and fascinating world of Renaissance women artists.

Books

Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting*. Translated by Cecil Grayson. Introduction and notes by Martin Kemp. London and New York: Penguin Classics, 1991. Reprint edition.
ISBN-13: 978-0140433319

Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style*. 2nd edition. Oxford Paperbacks. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1988. ISBN: 978-0192821447

Leonardo da Vinci, *Notebooks*. Selected by Irma A. Richter. Edited with introduction and notes by Thereza Wells. Preface by Martin Kemp. Oxford World's Classics. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 20028. ISBN-13: 978-0199299027

Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists*. Translated by Julia Conway Bondanella and Peter Bondanella. Oxford World's Classics. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008. ISBN-13: 978-0199537198

All other readings will be posted to the course Canvas page.