

## Early Renaissance

### **Paulo Uccello (1397- 1475)**

#### **Florence, Italy**

Uccello was a Florentine painter whose work attempted uniquely to reconcile two distinct artistic styles- the essentially decorative late Gothic and the new heroic style of the early Renaissance.

#### **Early Life**

- By the time Paulo was 10 years old he was already an apprentice in the workshop of the sculptor Lorenzo Ghiberti (who was working on the bronze doors of Baptistry).
- In 1414 Uccello joined the confraternity of painters and in the following year he became a member of the Arte dei Medici e degli Speciali, the official guild in Florence to which painters belonged.
- Uccello's earliest and now badly damaged frescoes are in the Green Cloister of Santa Maria Novella.
- They represent episodes from the creation. These frescoes are examples of linear forms, stylised patterning of landscapes and are in line with late Gothic tradition that was still present in the 15<sup>th</sup> century Florentine studios.
- From 1425 to 1431 Uccello worked as a master mosaic in Venice.
- He also worked on stained glass-versatile artist

#### **Influence**

- Paolo like other early renaissance artists such as **Brunnelleschi, Masaccio and Ghiberti** was fascinated by the problem of perspective.
- In his paintings the warriors with their jutting lances remind us of **medieval chivalric compositions** in which figures are stiff-limbed and wooden looking.
- Paulo tried to make his figures protrude from the flat picture plane, largely through use of strong contrast in light and dark elements rather than 3D modelling.
- Uccello loved painting **animals** and he kept a large number of pictures of all kinds of animals especially birds at home. He was nicknamed Paolo Ucelli (Paul of Bird's)
- Uccello's carousel horses and cartoonish figures are highly ornamental, **Gothic** in style in their use of decorative detailed surface texture. He is a transitional artist.

## Important Works

### **The Battle of San Romano, c 1440**

- This is created from egg tempera with walnut oil and linseed oil on poplar.
- This painting is about the victory of the Florentine army over the Sienese in 1432, for the Palazzo Medici in Florence.
- This painting comes in three panels, it is a large triptych. They are now separated. One in the Louvre, Paris; The National Gallery, London; and the Uffizi, Florence. Only the Uffizi panel is signed.
- The beauty of the countryside from the fruit and flowers to the partially coloured crossbowmen showing up brilliantly against the mellow brown terrain makes this battle seem somewhat natural and joyful.
- There is no blood to illustrate violence or war instead this painting glorifies the event.
- Niccolo da Tolentino was leader of the troops. He is identifiable by the motif of 'Knot of Solomon' on his banner. In this painting he is completely idealised. He wears his ceremonial outfit and sits on his lovely white horse, appearing unaffected by the battle. The atmosphere is somewhat unreal. The knights look like fake dummies of a medieval tournament. Uccello is more interested in perspective than the application of human feelings.
- He is unhorsing leader of the Sienese mercenaries. The General on the white horse is hit by an enemy spear.
- Uccello's depiction of a fallen figure on the ground is impressive and the first of its kind. He is known as the man who died for perspective. A deliberate feature to show his knowledge of foreshortening.
- Paolo further uses perspective in the broken lances on the ground all pointing toward a common vanishing point on the stage-like battlefield. He provides a visual structure in contrast to the chaos of the battle scene.
- In regards to composition the foreground does not flow into the background as the scale and angle change. It is a crowded composition.
- The lack of mid-ground is accentuated by the steeply tipped background with its tiny figures.
- The composition is not balanced. The left side is busier, the high spears lead high into the painting, drawing the eye up and creating a dominant aggressive side. This contrasts to the right where the figures appear crouched as if retreating.
- Diagonal lines are created in the piece through the shape and features of the landscape, such as grapevines and the dark hill, as well as the warrior's long spears pointing diagonally.
- The colours are bright. The theatrical light shines onto the painting from the front.
- He succeeded here to paint trees in their natural colours, in contrast with many of his predecessors.

- Decorative patterns of the figures and landscape are indebted to the Gothic Style.
- Uccello here displays an ability to paint a large number of animals.
- The Medici family acquired all three panels.



### **The Hunt in the Forest** (30 years after Battle of San Romano painting)

- 1470, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, England
- This painting shows a better knowledge of perspective, with the hunters, dogs and horses all disappearing into the forest in the distance.
- Uccello creates space in the painting through the use of linear perspective. He uses the trees on the ground as orthogonals that leads to the vanishing point in the centre of the painting.
- Each figure in the painting helps lead the eye into the central story of the painting.
- Uccello uses atmospheric perspective through the use of darker colours in the background.
- This painting is very balanced. The upper two thirds are dark while the bottom third is made of rich reds and whites. The top is made of the tree tops and the sky, the middle of dark tree trunks and the bottom with the figures hunting.
- The trees appear to have been painted like umbrellas as ellipses to further establish depth.
- Form is created through the use of modelling (shading).
- Everything is in proportion showing skill.
- The figures are solid with strong outlines from the use of bold colours. They interact together through strong gestures.
- The narrative creates a drama within the piece.



### Comparison

Both paintings have:

- Vanishing points
- Strong orthogonals
- Linear perspective
- Depth
- Tonal modelling
- Correct proportions
- Foreshortening

### **Later Life**

In 1436 in the Florentine Cathedral, Uccello completed a monochrome fresco of an equestrian monument to Sir John Hawkwood. In this fresco, there was a single point perspective scheme, sculptural treatment of horse and rider and sense of energy. These all indicate Uccello's desire to assimilate the new style of the Renaissance that had blossomed in Florence since his birth.