

## Early Renaissance

### **Masaccio (1401- 1428) Italian**

He was born as Tommaso Cassai but later became known as Masaccio, which is a pet name for Tommaso. It is not known where he trained as an artist. When he joined the artists guild of Florence in 1422 he was already an independent artist with his own workshop. He is most famous for his expert use of central perspective in his paintings, which was a technique developed to create the illusion of depth and space by Giotto, Ghiberti and Donatello. From Giotto he also learned to create three dimensional space, sculptural, realistic and naturalistic expressions and gestures. He preferred Greek and Roman sculpture rather than Gothic.

- The artist began by drawing a grid and sketching the objects and figures into it.
- He then chose a standpoint of the viewer in the centre of the painting. This is also called the vanishing point or centre of perspective.
- Using thread, he then measured lines outwards from the vanishing point to the objects and figures. This informed him of the depth of the objects within the painting. From this, he could figure out the sizes and dimensions of objects giving the impression they are receding into the distance or appearing close up.

### **Important Works**

#### **The Brancacci Chapel Frescoes, 1424-28**

- The frescoes that adorn the walls of the Brancacci Chapel in Florence are among the most famous of the entire Renaissance period. They are the result of contributions from a number of artists, including Masaccio.
- Masolino da Panicale began the paintings in 1424, assisted by a young Masaccio
- Masaccio took over the project in 1425 until his death in 1428
- Filippino Lippi then completed the paintings.

#### **The Tribute Money, c. 1425**

- This huge scene on the upper level of the chapel relates to the yearly tax payment for the maintenance of the temple in Jerusalem.
- He tells the story as a continuous narrative i.e. showing separate scenes from the story all together in the same picture.
- Jesus and his disciples have come to the gates of the city and the tax collector asks Peter for money. Peter is reluctant but Jesus insists on payment.
- It is a small and unimportant biblical event and so was an unusual choice for such a large artwork.

- It has been interpreted over the years in several ways but the Brancacci family were bankers so it probably relates to the duty of paying taxes.
- This fresco incorporates three scenes telling the story of how Jesus and his apostles received money to pay a tribute to the temple. It is an unusual and very effective composition set against a background showing Masaccio's use of perspective.
- The story begins in the centre of the composition, with Jesus telling saint Peter to look in the mouth of a fish in the lake for coins to pay the tax collector.
- The next part of the story is on the left showing Peter taking the money from the fish's mouth.
- The concluding episode showing the coins being handed over is on the right.
- Masaccio shows strong monumental figures painted with sculptural-like shadow.
- Peter's pose is an exact replica of Christ's suggesting that both had equal authority. Similarly both appearances of the tax collector are mirror images of each other.
- This has the effect of locking the main characters of the story into a single unit within the composition.
- Masaccio uses central perspective to draw the eye to the figure of Jesus in the middle. All of the diagonal perspective lines from the architecture of the temple on the right meet at the vanishing point behind Christ's head.
- Aerial perspective is also used to let the figures emerge from the background. The cool greys and blues of the mountains fade as they recede, creating the illusion that they are in the distance. By contrast, the robes of the men are mainly warm reds. Oranges and crimsons which leap to the viewer's eye.



### **The Expulsion from Paradise, c. 1425**

- This painting portrays Adam and Eve being cast out of the Garden of Eden by an angry angel, after their fall from grace.

- It is a highly dramatic scene, showing Masaccio's vast knowledge of anatomy, light and shade and narrative skills.
- The figures of Adam and Eve show their individual remorse in an innovative and moving way.
- Adam covers his face in despair, his shoulders slumped in dejection. He symbolises man's horror at his own actions which lead to terrible consequences.
- Eve has a more obvious reaction than Adam, her head thrown back in anguish, her features contorted in agony. She attempts to cover her nakedness, indicated physical shame

### Holy Trinity, c.1427

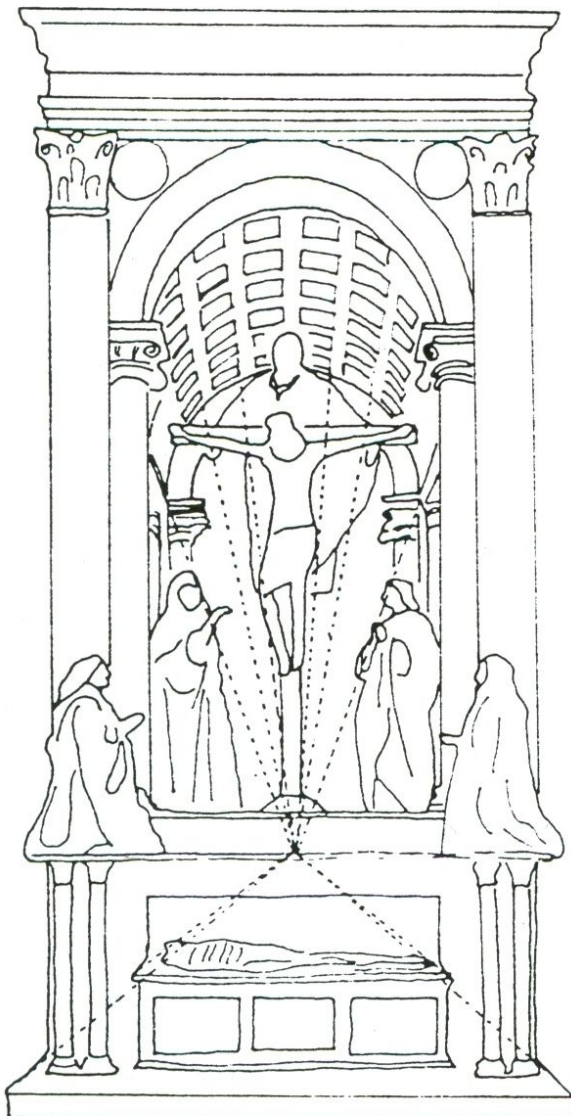
- In this fresco, Masaccio became the first painter to apply central perspective/ single point linear perspective in its most correct and consistent form. This makes it one of the most notable in the history of painting. It is located in the church of Santa Maria Novella, in Florence.
- The figure of Christ can be seen hanging from the cross in the centre, with his feet as the vanishing point for the entire composition at eye level.
- The painting creates the image of real space in the architectural setting of the small chapel with the three persons of the trinity.
- A huge figure of god the father supporting the arms of the cross dominates the scene. He solemnly presents his son.
- The two figures shown beside the cross are the Virgin and Saint Joseph, with God the Father appearing behind the body of Jesus.
- The Holy Spirit is shown as a quickly painted dove between Christ and God the Father.
- The Patrons of this fresco, two members of the wealthy Florentine Lenzi family, are shown kneeling to either side, as a sign of their piety and devotion
- The great sense of perspective is achieved mostly by the portrayal of the vaulted ceiling framed by the pilasters on each side.



- To construct the perspective lines of the picture, Masaccio first drew a rough sketch of the scene, which was then covered by plaster. In order not to lose the central point, he knocked a nail into the wall just below the base of the cross then drew strings out from it, pressing them into the plaster. These marks can still be seen today.
- Below the base of the cross and below our line of vision a tomb with a skeleton tilts forward. Written in Latin is an ancient warning that translates: 'I was what you are and what you are and what I am you shall be'



1427, Fresco, Santa Maria Novella, in Florence.



### Influence

- Masaccio's profound influence on Renaissance painting is remarkable given his early death at the age of 27. He moved Italian painting away from the International Gothic Style to a more naturalistic approach.
- His use of a single light source and chiaroscuro to create solid figures, combined with his use of perspective, transformed painting in renaissance Florence.
- His influence can be seen in the paintings of Piero della Francesca, Mantegna, Da Vinci and Michelangelo.

### Personal Style and Technique

- Contemplative, serene atmosphere

- Several scenes from a story depicted together
- Use of gestures and facial expressions to depict emotions
- Use of gestures and facial expressions to depict emotions
- Mathematically planned compositions
- Skillful use of single point linear perspective
- Use of atmospheric perspective in landscape
- Use of chiaroscuro to make figures look three dimensional
- Limited palette of colours

\*Fresco: a painting on wet plaster. When the plaster dries, the painting is bonded to the wall.

\*Aerial/ Atmospheric Perspective: the illusion of depth is created by making things look paler the further they are from viewer. Changes in tone and colour are used to suggest space. The distant landscape may be blurred and its coloured less intense or tints with pale blue

\*Chiaroscuro: means light-dark in Italian. In a painting or drawing gradual gradations of light and shade are use to create depth and three dimensional form