

The Nativity Story from the Renaissance to the Baroque.

An exploration of the principle developments in the techniques of painting over three centuries, where the Nativity narrative was preeminent. We begin with the *Annunciation*, then move on to the *Birth of Christ* and complete with the *Flight into Egypt*.

The Annunciation

And the angel came in unto her and said, Hail, thou are highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women.

And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name Jesus.

And Mary said, Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word. And the Angel departed.



The Annunciation scene from the Maesta by Duccio Buoninsenga, National Gallery.

This is one small wooden-panel from the predella, that is the name given to a row of paintings, located below the principal panel painting. During the late 18th century the Maesta was partially dismembered, which was how the National Gallery was able to acquire this valuable fragment. Duccio and Giotto de Bordone were the first early 14th century Italian painters to endow figures with greater presence and humanity.

The Annunciation event was predicted by Isaiah in the Old Testament and is narrated in the New Testament in St Luke's Gospel. This announcement of the birth of Christ, the precise moment of the Incarnation, when the word was made flesh, has been one of the most frequently depicted episodes in the life of Christ.



The Maesta, 1307-11, Duccio Buoninsegna, egg tempera on panel, Siena Cathedral.

Ceremoniously delivered to the Cathedral in 1311, this work is now regarded as the finest and most complex altarpiece of the early 14th century, unfortunately now partially dismembered, a fate suffered by many such works of art. Above the principal scene of Mary enthroned with the Christ child in her arms, are scenes from the life of Mary, whilst below in the predella are scenes from the life of Christ. On the reverse are a further 43 scenes from the lives of Christ & Mary.

Note especially the remaining Byzantine influence of Mary enthroned in Majesty, her relative size and that of The Child in relation to that of the surrounding figures and the custom of presenting Jesus as a partly-grown child, rather than a baby.



The Annunciation, 1453, Fra Filippo Lippi, tempera on panel, N.G. London.

Egg tempera on panel, that is egg yolk as the binding medium mixed with various pigments, applied to a supporting surface of a wooden panel, in Italy most often Poplar, whilst in Northern Europe, Oak.

Left as an orphan, Lippi was brought up by Carmine monks and in later life he and his intended wife, a Nun, were given dispensation by the Pope to give up their vows of celibacy and marry.

Lippi was influenced by the monumentality of form of Masaccio, tempered by the delicacy and sweetness of Fra Angelico.

The concept of Mary in an enclosed Garden, Hortus Conclusus, refers to the immaculate virgin birth, free from concupiscence and original sin, following the expulsion from the Garden of Eden. The Hortus Conclusus was a traditional theme in Marian painting during the Renaissance. The term is derived from the Latin Vulgate Bible's, *Canticle of Canticles*, also referred to as the *Song of Songs*, or *Song of Solomon*.

"A garden enclosed is my sister, my spouse, a garden enclosed, a fountain sealed up"

"Thou Art all fair, my love; there is no spot on thee"

This last verse was regarded as the scriptural confirmation of the developing doctrine of the 'Immaculate Conception', being born without 'Original Sin.'



The Madonna of the Rose Bower, 1410, Stefan Lochner, oil on panel, Cologne.

This small panel is a fine example of an early interpretation of the Hortus Conclusus, where Mary and the Christ Child, are seated in a small enclosed garden, with a rose bower, surrounded by angels playing a variety of musical instruments. Notice the apple in the Child's left hand, a reference to Adam and Eve's 'Fall from Grace', following expulsion from the Garden of Eden.

Lochner was a German painter, who worked in the Late International Gothic style. His paintings combine the characteristics of that style, long flowing lines and exaggerated poses and gestures, together with vivid colours and the innovative iconography of the early Northern European Renaissance.



The Annunciation, 1472, Leonardo da Vinci, oil and tempera on panel, Uffizi

By the middle of the 15th century, artists were using both oil (linseed, or walnut) and egg yolk as the binding mediums for the pigment. This enabled a greater sense of depth and reality, especially when the image was built up in multiple layers of oil/pigment glazes, a technique thought to have been perfected by Jan van Eyck during the painting of the iconic *Ghent Altarpiece*, *The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb*.

This interpretation of the Annunciation was the joint work of the twenty-year-old Florentine painter Leonardo, his first autograph work and his master Andrea Verrocchio. Whilst Verrocchio painted the Virgin Mary, his protégé painted both the Angel Gabriel and the background landscape.

Notice the particular 'graciousness' of the figure of the Angel Gabriel and the attention to the depiction of the folds of the robe material; there are numerous drawings by Leonardo in which he has faithfully recorded the fall of drapery. Also to be noted, is the ethereal landscape, so typical of the paintings in which Leonardo included landscape; compare for instance with the background landscape in the *Mona Lisa*.

Here one can see how Leonardo has used the template of Lippi's *Annunciation*. Traditionally in such scenes, the Angel Gabriel is placed on the right of the composition and Mary is placed generally on the left, variously standing, seated, or kneeling, in front of a prie-dieu, exhibiting a pose of modesty, or abeyance.

The Annunciation with Saint Emidius, 1486,
Carlo Crivelli, egg tempera and oil on canvas,
transferred from panel, N.G. London.

This wonderfully complex and decorative altarpiece, painted by Carlo Crivelli for the Franciscan Church of the Annunciation in Ascoli Piceno, in the region known as the Marche, was commissioned to celebrate the granting of limited self-government, granted to the town in 1482 by Pope Sixtus IV.

Carlo Crivelli was a painter, whose work is typical of the Late International Gothic sensibility, a style typified by flowing lines, dramatic poses and gestures. He spent his early years in the Veneto, where he absorbed the influences of Vivarini, Squarcione and Andrea Mantegna and later moved to the March of Ancona, where he developed his mature style, quite different from his Venetian contemporary Giovanni Bellini.





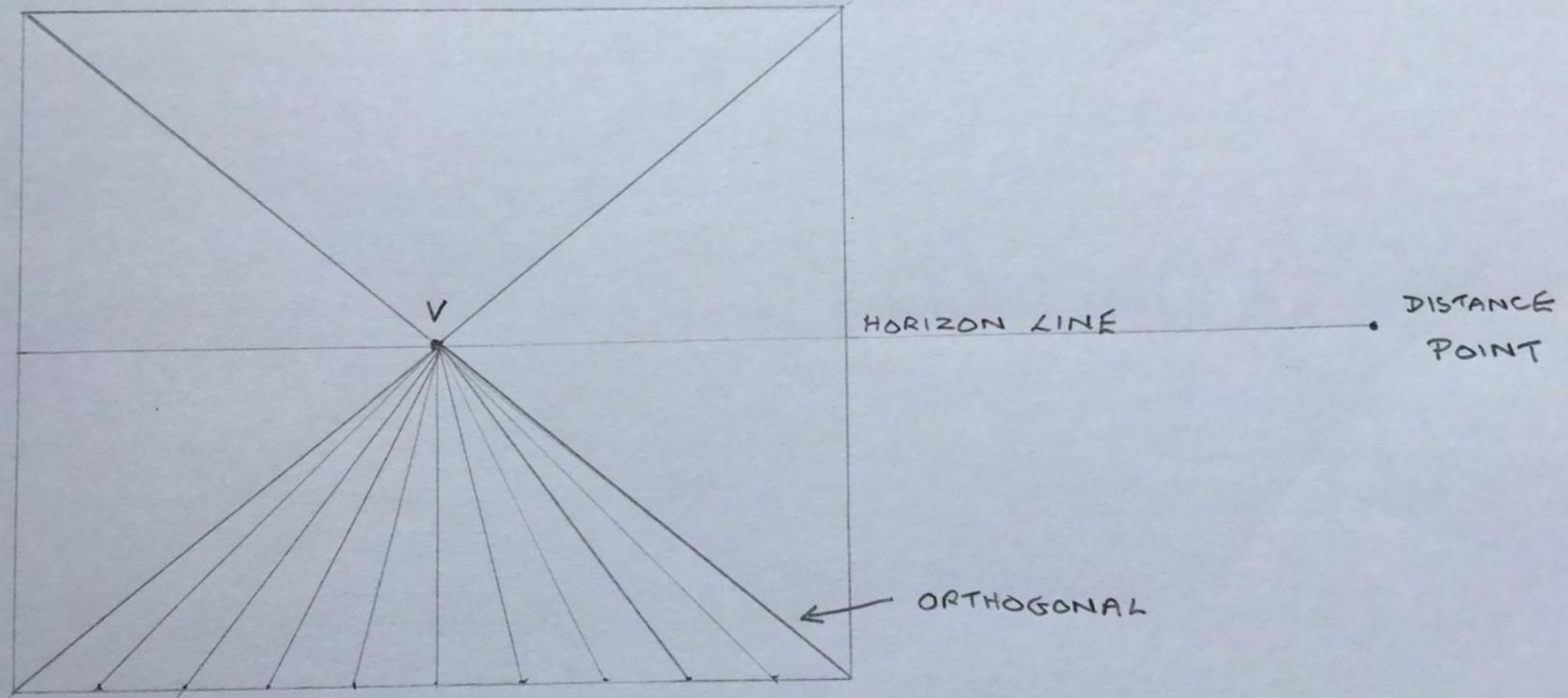
To find room within the vertical format for the extensive urban vista, Crivelli has relied on deep perspective. One of the most important discoveries of the early Renaissance, was that of Geometric, Linear, or Point Perspective, a mathematical formula, which enabled painters to construct the illusion of three dimensional reality on a two dimensional support, either panel, or canvas. The discovery was first made by Brunelleschi in the early 15th century and published in a treatise by Leon Baptiste Alberti in 1435. The ground-breaking *Della Pittura, On Painting*, enabled artists to place figures within an illusion of believable three dimensional space, representing reality.

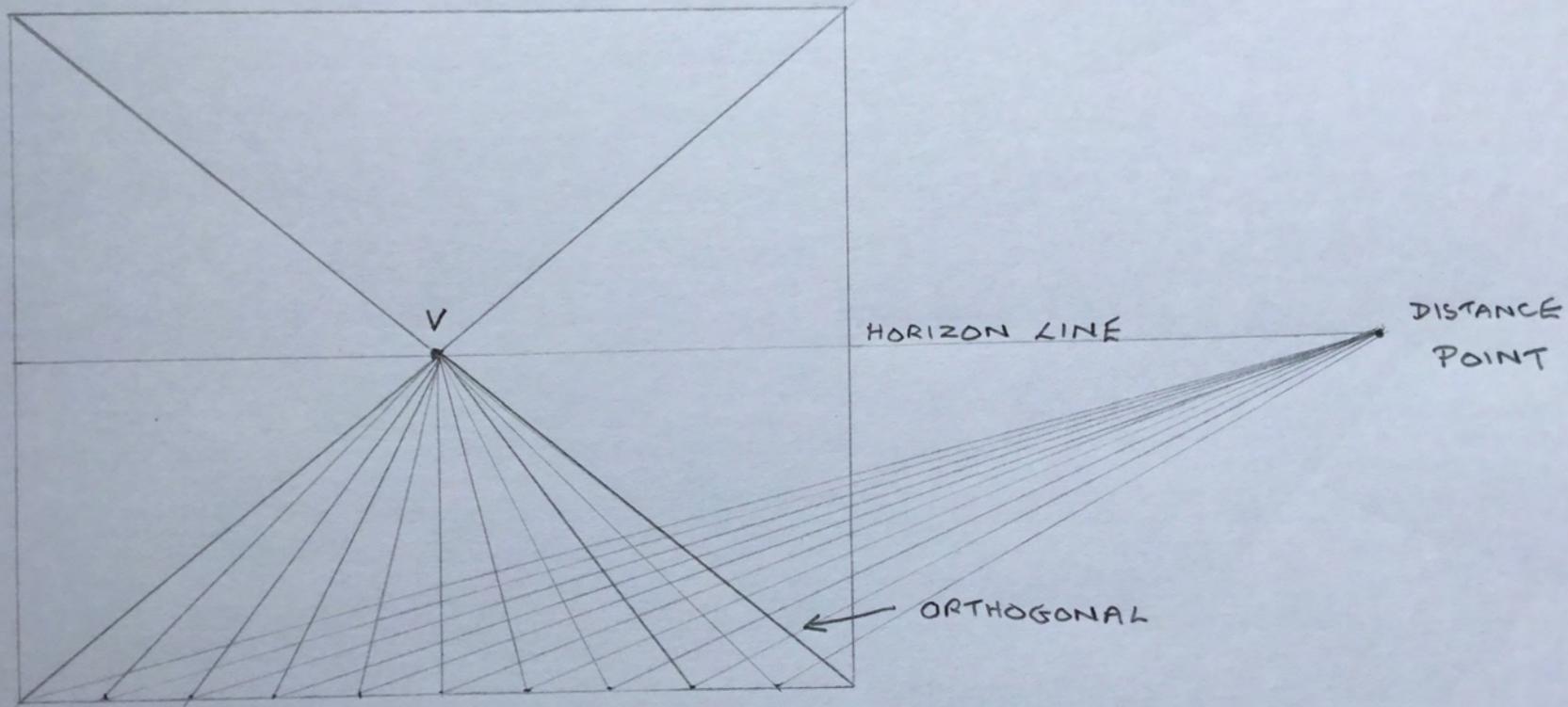
Linear perspective is based simply on the fact that the greater the distance the eye is from the object, the smaller it progressively and uniformly appears. The painting is a wonderful example, where one can imagine all the architectural lines converging at a point beyond the wall seen through the archway.

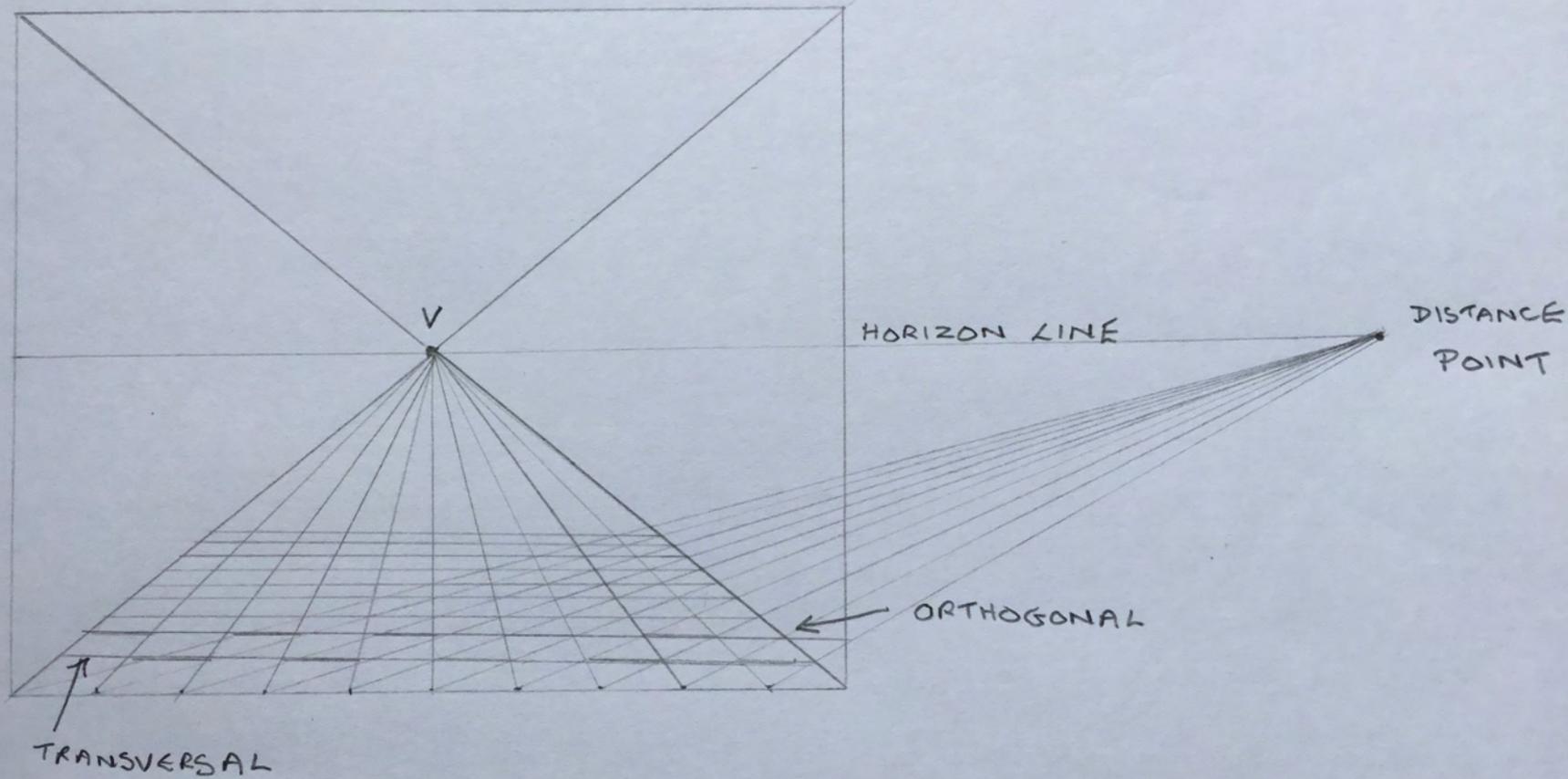


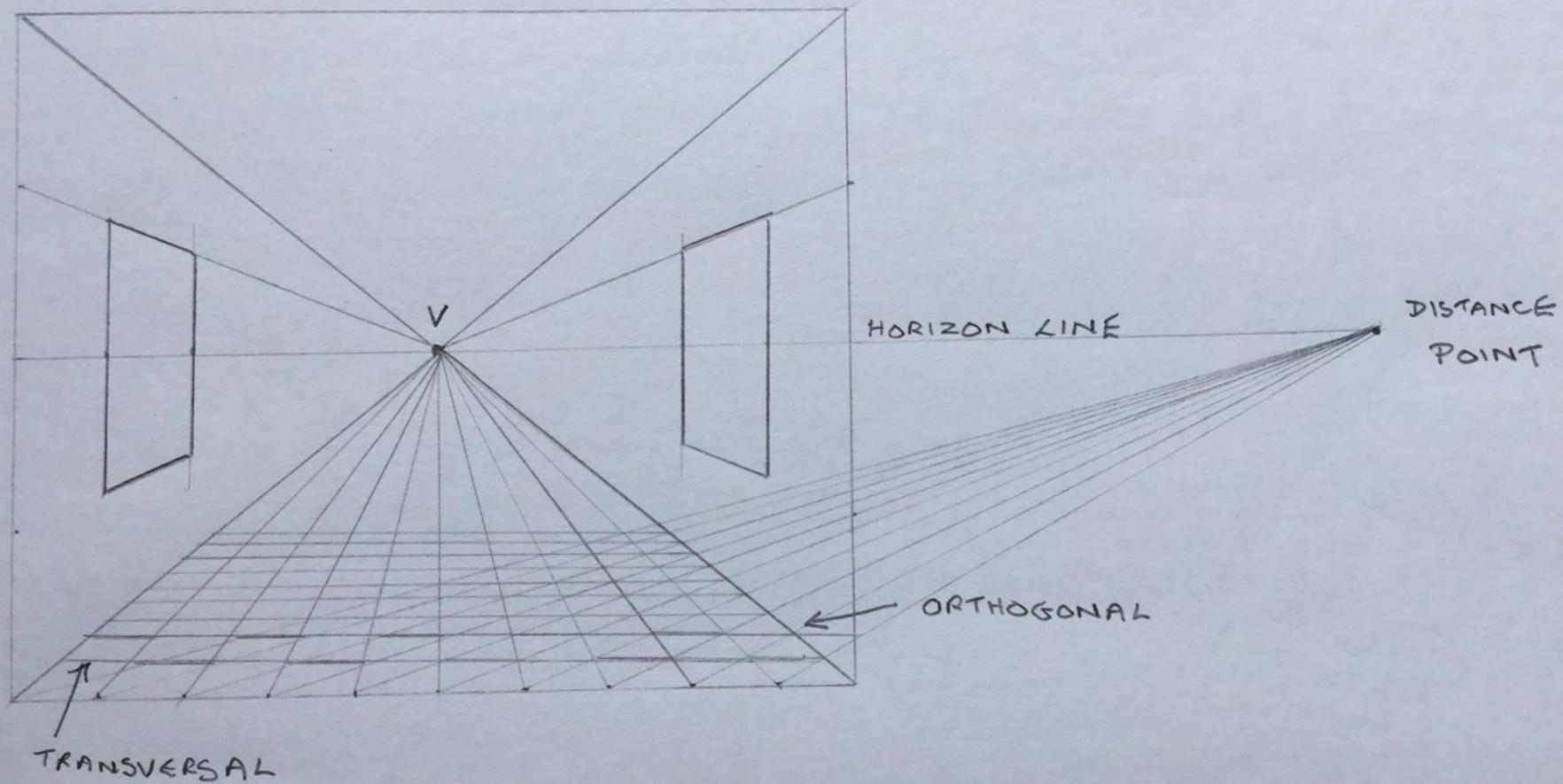
This covered walk-way in a park in Osaka is a perfect example in everyday life of linear, vanishing point perspective, where the posts, pavement tiles and benches are becoming uniformly smaller the further away they are, until at a point just beyond the end of the tunnel, one can imagine a vanishing point

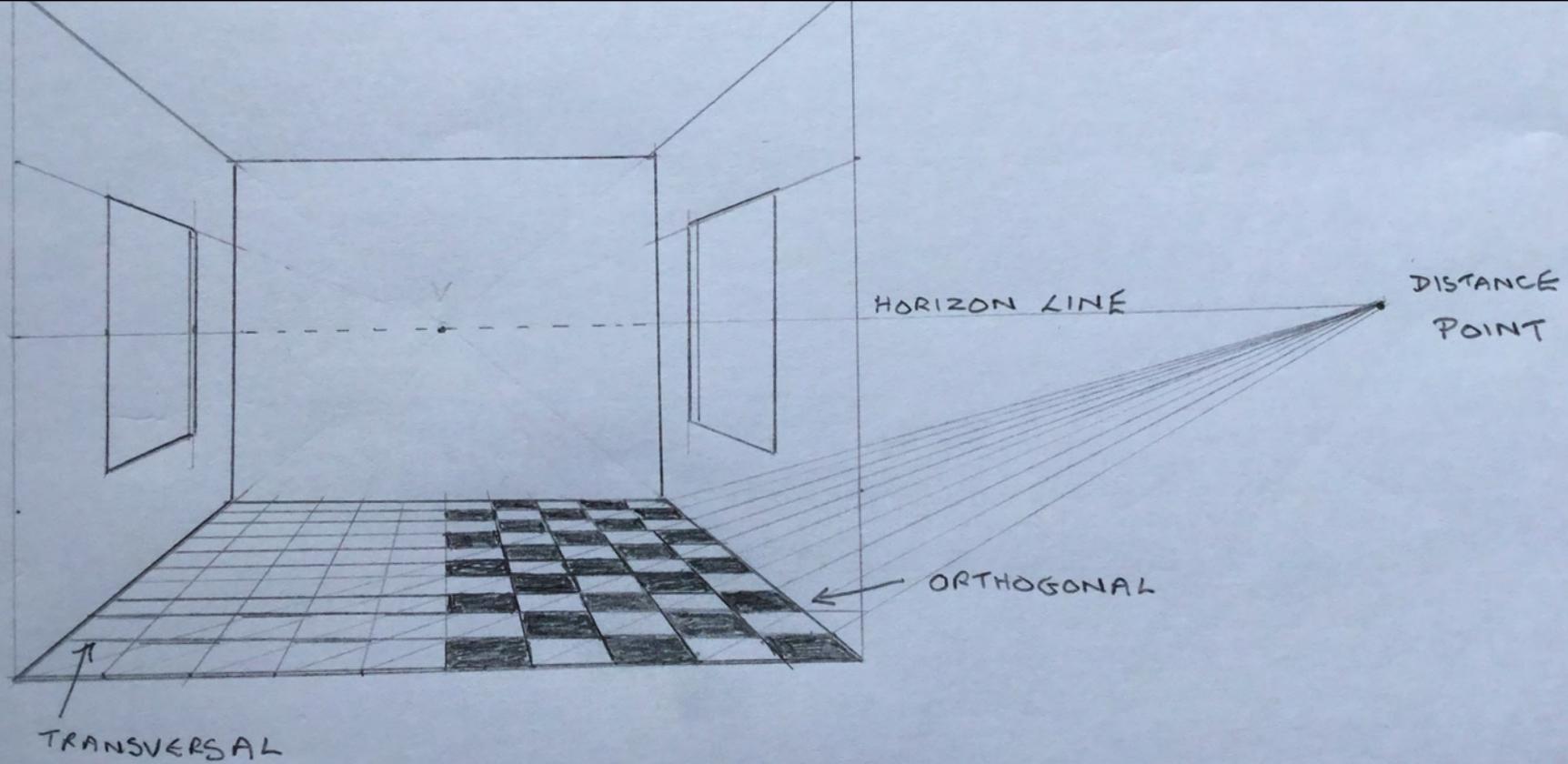
The following seven images are a simplified explanation of how an artist would in practice construct the illusion of a three dimensional space, a room with windows in which one figure has been placed.

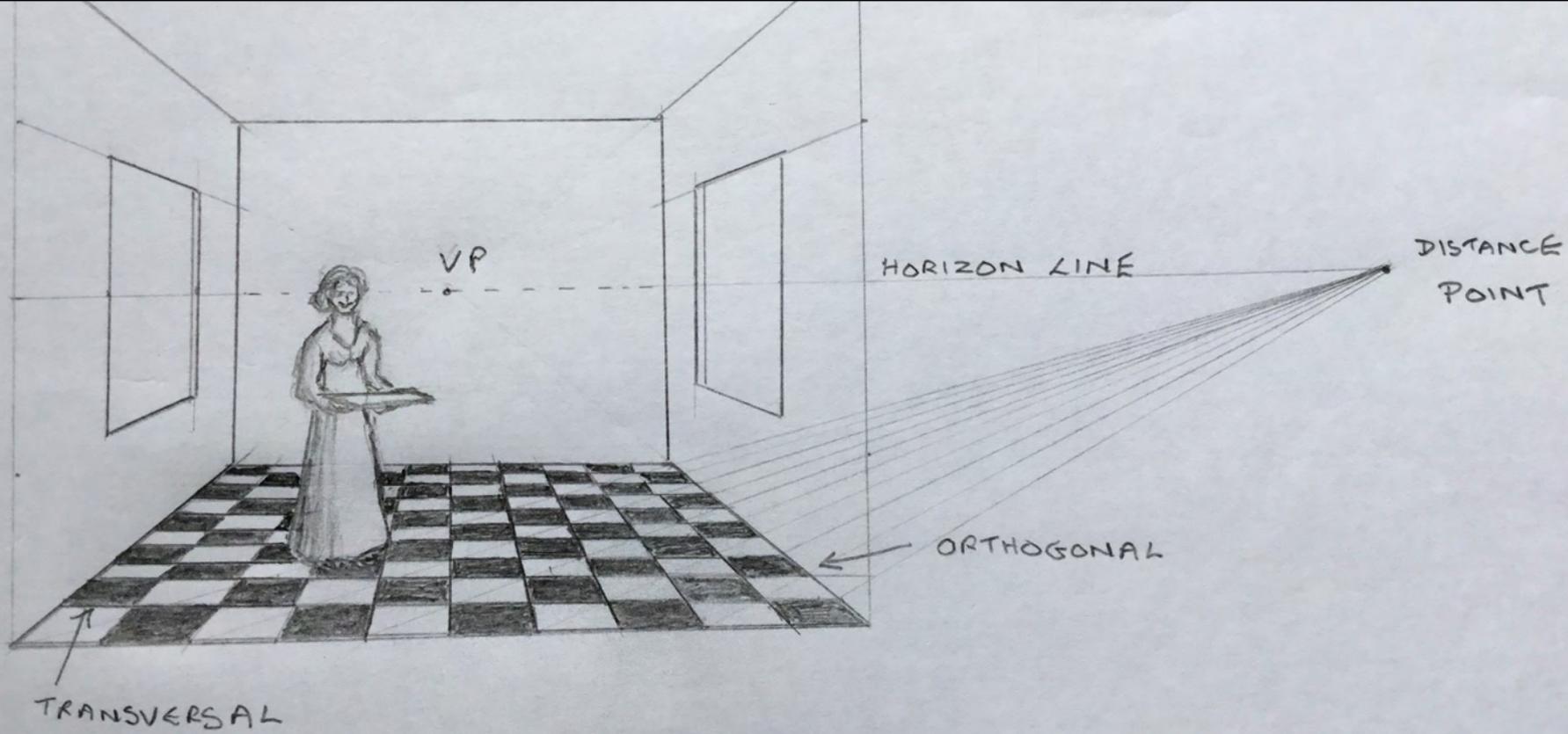


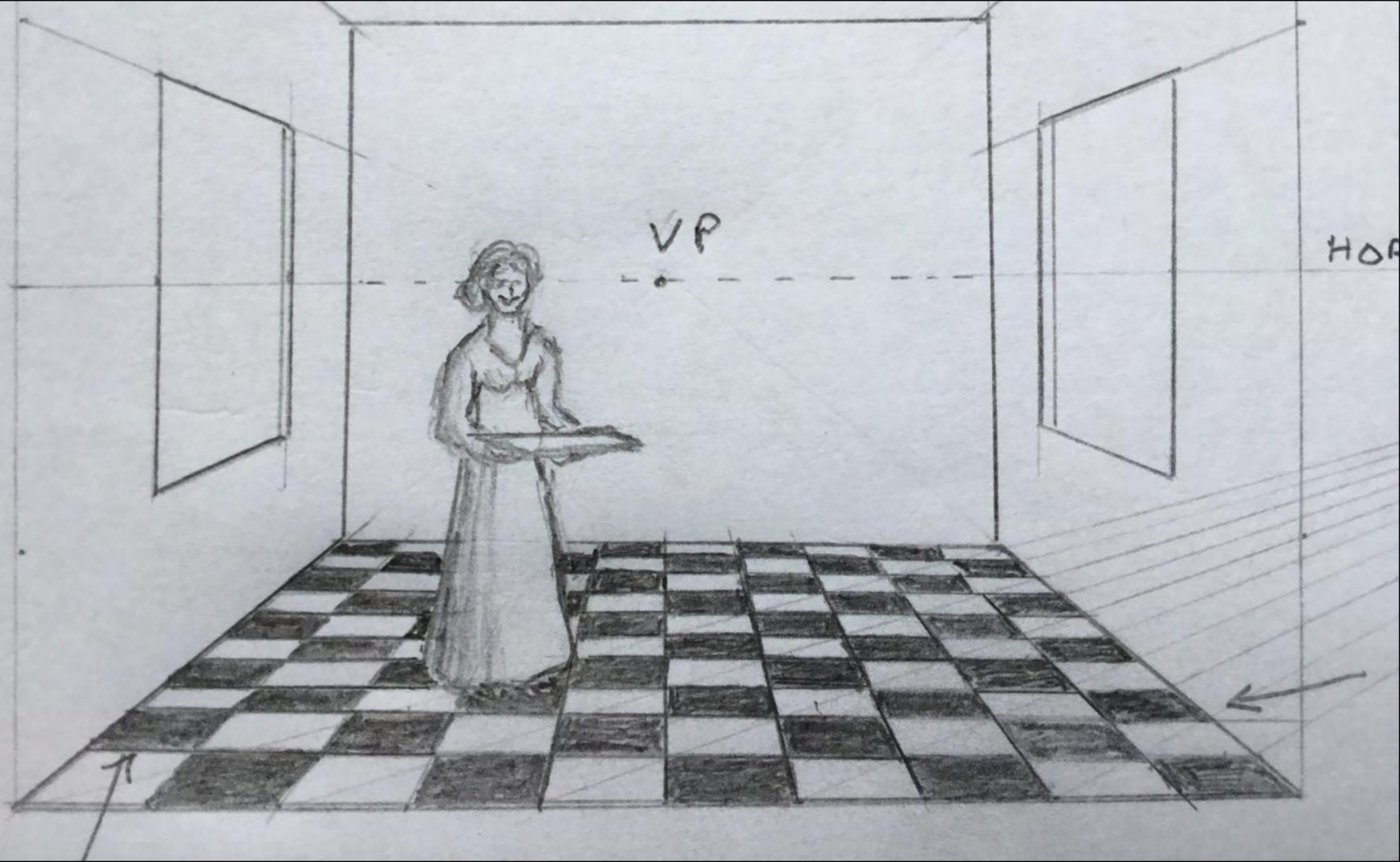














The news of the privilege of limited self-government reached the city on the 25th March 1482, the Feast of the Annunciation.

So here we see in this incredibly detailed altarpiece, kneeling on the ground, the Angel Gabriel and the martyred bishop, St Emidius, who is holding a model of the city. Within a room we see Mary kneeling in the typical pose, reading a book resting on a prie-dieu. Miraculously, the Dove of the Holy Ghost appears above her head, bringing the word of God, that she should conceive a son named Jesus.

In the lower portion of the composition, the apple represents the forbidden fruit associated with the fall of man and the cucumber symbolises the promise of resurrection and redemption.



A beam of heavenly light descends onto Mary's head and at the same time the figure on the bridge reads a letter from the Pope granting limited self-government. The letter was carried by a pigeon, now safely back in its cage on the bridge parapet.

Monks on the right of the painting look down from the top of steps, whilst a little child peers around the corner, to see what is going on. Notice the wealth of meticulously represented detail from the interior of Mary's room, to the carpet lying over the balcony of what might be described as a loggia and the peacock, perched on a sill. The peacock in paintings with a Biblical, or Mythological narrative symbolise immortality, as its flesh was thought not to rot.

The Merode Annunciation Triptych, 1432, Robert Campin, oil on oak, MMoA





The three panels from left to right depict the donor kneeling in prayer with his wife behind him, the moment of the Annunciation in the central panel and finally, Joseph in his carpenter's shop. This celebrated triptych is an important milestone between the late Gothic and early Netherlandish style of painting. It at once summarizes the medieval tradition and lays the foundations of modern painting.

The painting is one of the earliest representations of the Annunciation in a contemporary middle-class Northern European interior. Whilst the perspective of the top of the table is problematical, the detail is miraculous, greatly enhanced by the use of oil paints laid down in glazed layers, providing a porcelain like finish.



In this close-up of the table, with its surface turned up towards the viewer, contrary to the laws of perspective, which Paul Cezanne would famously abandon in the late 19th century, we see in exquisite detail, the extinguished candle in it's candle-stick, the open book, probably the Hebrew Old Testament, laid upon it's green bag and the decorated jug with a single stem of lilies, symbolic of Mary's purity.



In this image we see in the foreground, Joseph, wearing an ultramarine-blue chaperon, whilst beyond, through the open window is a main thoroughfare, or square in the City of Tournai, which is where Robert Campin had his workshop. In vivid detail, city folk are seen strolling around. On a wooden shop-front platform outside the open shutter, there appears to be a mouse-trap, thought to be a reference to the writings of St Augustine, identifying the cross as the devil's mouse-trap. On the table to the left of Joseph is what appears to be an awl.

In the next slide, we can further admire Campin's extraordinary skill in the depiction of the carpenter's tools. Sometimes referred to as The Master of Flemalle, Campin employed Rogier van der Weyden, who would in turn, become one of the great masters of Netherlandish painting.



The Birth and Adoration

And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the baby lying in a manger. Luke 2: 15-20



The Birth of Christ, 1304-9, Giotto, Fresco, Scrovegni Chapel, Padua.

The series of frescoes of the lives of Mary and Christ in the Scrovegni Chapel represent the true beginnings of the period in Art History, that we now regard as the Renaissance. In other words the rebirth in interest in the Classical Greek and Roman worlds, the impact of Humanism and an associated move away from Medieval and Byzantine art. Giotto, closely followed by Duccio were the first exponents of the attempt to place figures in believable space and give them a humanity not seen before. They were also the first painters to 'tell a story', the least well recognised aspect of the Renaissance.



Adoration of the Magi, Capella dei Scrovegni

In this scene, we see the the three wise men bearing their gifts, with Mary and the Christ Child within a rudimentary stable. Note especially the shooting star, that supposedly guided the Magi to the place where Christ was born and the interaction between the camel in the foreground and the servant captured in the act of feeding it. The patchy appearance of Mary's robe and the sky, originally uniformly blue, is due to the deterioration of the fresco surface, where the ultramarine pigment was painted on dry, rather than on wet plaster, the latter being more durable.



The Adoration of the Magi, 1424,
Gentile da Fabriano, tempera on panel,
Uffizi.

This beautiful altarpiece was commissioned by the Florentine banker Palla Strozzi for the Church of Santa Trinity and is now regarded as the culminating work of the art period known as the International Gothic. The patron is depicted as the courtier seen in profile, immediately behind the Magus having his stirrups removed.

The elaborate frame is an integral part of the painting and has a direct bearing on the compositional structure. Here the ceremonial act of gift giving threatens to overwhelm the Holy Family, placed to the side of the scene, rather than centrally, the Christ child no longer in swaddling clothes, is now seated more naturally on his mother's knee, seen reaching forward to bless the kneeling Magus.



The style here is one of magnificence and opulence, with extravagant use of the most expensive pigments and gold leaf; to fully appreciate the craftsmanship, it must be seen first hand in the Uffizi. One can only imagine the impact this 'crowd pleaser', would have had on the average 15th century church goer, where within a dark interior, flickering candle-light would have danced off layers of silver and gold paint that had been moulded, etched and glazed into glittering textures. All the assembled throng wear expensive contemporary costumes, brocades, richly decorated with gold leaf and semiprecious stones inserted into the panel. Close observation reveals the presence of exotic animals, a leopard, a dromedary camel, apes, as well as magnificent horses and a hound, looking up in concern as the hooves of a nearby horse threaten to trample it.

There is a continuous narrative from the upper right of the painting, where the Magi procession follow the star to Jerusalem and then onto Bethlehem on the upper left and then on to the final scene in the foreground. Fabriano is believed to have been paid 300 florins, the equivalent of six times the annual salary for a skilled craftsman.

Here Christian and secular worlds are inextricably linked, not only to the Glory of God, but the promotion of power and wealth.

The Adoration of the Shepherds, 1505-10, Giorgione, oil on panel, N.G. Washington



Also known as the *Allendale Nativity*, this beautifully balanced and harmonious composition is by the enigmatic Venetian master Giorgione, who died, most likely of the plague in 1510, leaving behind in a short career, a small, but wondrous body of work. He was the Venetian master, whose work connects the father of Venetian painting, Giovanni Bellini to the High Renaissance master, Titian.

The setting of a cave for the adoration of the shepherds was an alternative option to the stable in Early Renaissance painting and the extensive landscape, is more typical of the Veneto, Giorgione's birth-place being Castelfranco.





The Adoration of the Shepherds, 1650, Bartolome Esteban Murillo, oil on canvas, Prado.

Moving forward to the Baroque period, this interpretation of the Nativity scene remains close to the New Testament texts and is very much influenced first by the originator of the Baroque, Caravaggio and his Spanish disciple living in Italy for most of his life, Jusepe Ribera. Murillo, born in Seville in 1617, was with his contemporaries Diego Velasquez and Francesco Zubaran, one of the most renowned masters of the Spanish Baroque.

The strong lighting with associated equally intense shade/shadows, known in artistic terms as Tenebrism and the naturalism of the figures, are both characteristics of the Caravaggesque Baroque, which Ribera used to great effect in his Biblical scenes and Murillo extended still further to include many secular depictions of street scenes with peasant children, for which he became especially renowned.

The Flight into Egypt

Arise, take the young child and his mother, flee to Egypt and stay there until I bring you word; for Herod will seek the young Child to destroy Him. Matthew 2:13

The Flight into Egypt, 1305-9, Giotto, fresco, Scrovegni Chapel, Padua



A further scene from the frescoed walls of the Scrovegni Chapel, depicting the flight of the Holy Family from Bethlehem, following Joseph's dream that foretold the decree of Herod that all newborn male children should be killed, whereupon they travelled to Egypt to seek sanctuary. The background landscape is very much still that of the medieval 'landscape of symbols', with archaic hills and scattered trees, more a simplistic representation than any attempt at reality. Above the Holy family, a guardian Angel directs the way to safety. As we shall see, this interpretation of the narrative was to inform those of many other later Renaissance painters. Mary's robe would originally have been bright blue, like that of the sky.



The Flight into Egypt,
1508, Titian, oil on
canvas, Hermitage

This, the young Titian's first commission, was in terms of scale, greater focus on the landscape and the inclusion of naturalistic animals, ground-breaking and yet the basic composition is unchanged from Giotto's template in the Scrovegni Chapel. The naturalistic appearance of the animals owes a debt to Albrecht Durer, whose prints would have been available in Venice by the early 16th century.





The Flight into Egypt, 1515, Vittore Carpaccio, oil on panel, N.G. Washington.

Here as in the Titian representation, a sense of danger and urgency is subordinated to the charm of incidental detail. There is a clear debt to the Venetian master Giovanni Bellini, but perhaps most profoundly the depiction by Titian a short time before. However, here Carpaccio even out does Titian in his quest for vivid colour.



The Holy Family with a Palm Tree, 1506, oil on canvas, Raphael, N.G. Scotland.

The miracle of the Palm Tree is told in the *The Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew* and is closely associated with the miracle of the Spring, incidents on the journey from Bethlehem to Egypt. Here in a beautifully balanced, serene scene, the Christ child is seen picking dates from Joseph's hand. Within a round frame, the finished work known as a Tondo, based on a Birth-tray, is an exquisite example of the works that Raphael produced in Florence. The painting might have been commissioned as a gift for private devotion.





The Flight into Egypt, 1510, Gerard David, oil on panel, N.G. Washington.

In this serene scene, the Flemish painter Gerard David has focussed on Mary and the child sitting on her lap, holding a bunch of grapes, the grape being a commonly used symbol for the wine of the Eucharist; whilst in the background, Joseph appears to be knocking down nuts from a tree. David's adherence to the Italian Renaissance convention of a pyramidal composition and his use of colour, blue being the conventional one for Mary's outer garments, signifying her purity and the glimpse of a red under-garment, symbolising Christ's passion, together make for a compelling picture. It's interesting to compare David's Northern European conception of the appearance of Mary and the Child, where the baby Jesus harks back to the Byzantine template of the older child, versus the appearance of Jesus as a baby in the Raphael.



Rest during the Flight into Egypt, The Miracle of the Corn, 1520, Joachim Patinir, oil on panel, Prado, Madrid

This wonderfully complex narrative painting by the Flemish master Patinir, is, like most of his Biblical paintings, a wonderful example of synchronous narratives, not only depicting Mary suckling the Christ child, but other incidents related to the Flight. Not content with that, Patinir has added many other anecdotal details, some related to the Flight, others purely incidental. The appearance of Mary and the Christ Child must surely have been influenced by David's earlier painting, of which David painted several variants, all with the same pyramidal, centrally placed composition of mother and child. Patinir, together with his German contemporary, Albrecht Altdorfer, would become renowned for their so-called 'World landscapes', in which the biblical, or historical narrative, became an excuse for a panoramic landscape.

The following series of images depict:

- First in the foreground, the miracle of the corn and in the background the massacre of the innocents.
- The following scene depicts the demise of paganism, with on the top of the dome the fall of a graven image and on the right seated, a representation of the devil himself, with figures bringing forth animal sacrifices.
- The next depicts in the foreground a small spring, into which water is flowing and with several examples of plants symbolic to the narrative of Mary and Christ. Amusingly, we see again a pair of golden feet, the idolatrous statue having fallen into the spring.
- And finally we return to Mary, centrally placed nursing her Child.









The market for such paintings diminished as a result of the Council of Trent, which met for 25 sessions between 1545-63. Prompted by the Protestant Reformation, it has been described as the embodiment of the Counter-Reformation. Whilst the Protestant Reformation brought about the destruction of religious imagery considered idolatrous, the Counter-Reformation sought to continue to use the arts to propagate the doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church. In the third session, that assigned to the arts, it was declared that religious works should appeal to the masses in a simple, clear and realistic manner. The employment of narratives from sources such as the *Apocrypha*, or Jacobus de Varagine's *Golden Legend* were to be avoided, instead using narratives from the accepted Vulgate version of the Bible.

The Carracci dynasty of the Bolognese School, especially Annibale and his brother Agostino, were the progenitors of the initial strand of painting, that responded to this fresh doctrine and which we now regard as having some of the characteristics of the Baroque; rich colour, dynamic lines and drama. At its best, Baroque painting was meant to evoke emotion and passion, instead of the calm rationality of the Renaissance. Caravaggio's arrival in Rome in the early to mid 1590s, then further fundamentally changed the way in which paintings were composed. His most important and enduring innovations were the use of strong lighting, which in turn produced profound shade, a more pronounced Chiaroscuro, also known as Tenebrism and the employment of colleagues, be they fellow artists, companions, prostitutes, or lovers, as models. Thus scenes took on the appearance of theatre, or cinema on canvas, with Caravaggio as director.

After his death on the beach at Port Ercole in 1610, Caravaggio's legacy would be carried forward by his Roman followers, including Orazio and Artemesia Gentileschi, Bartolommeo Manfredi and Giovanni Baglione and his style of painting would influence Rubens, Rembrandt, Velasquez and Ribera to name just a few of the principal masters of the 17th century, Baroque period.



The Rest on the Flight into Egypt, 1597, Caravaggio, oil on canvas, Palazzo Doria Pamphilj, Rome.

Probably the first large scale work with a Biblical theme painted by the young Caravaggio and certainly the only one to have a landscape background. It is unique for several reasons, namely the concept of Joseph holding the music for the violin-playing Angel and the naturalism of the figures, especially of the Christ Child, surely the most sensitive representation in the history of painting to date. The most insistent influence here is surely the work of the Venetian painters, Giorgione and Titian, where Caravaggio has conceived the composition as a kind of 'Fete Champetre', a musical picnic.



The Flight into Egypt, 1609, Adam Elsheimer, oil on copper, Alte Pinakothek, Munich.

Adam Elsheimer, the German painter, who travelled to Rome to participate in the Italian Baroque revolution in painting instigated by Caravaggio, painted this wonderful small painting, one of only a handful of masterpieces produced in a short life-time of just thirty-two years.

The importance of this painting lies in the fact that its nocturnal sky was based on a view through a telescope, which had just been invented by Galileo, who published his findings in 1610 and as a result was interrogated by the Inquisition. The painting is the first, well-founded depiction of the Milky Way and the surface of the moon in the history of art. It is also the first use of a diagonal in space to achieve continuous depth, in other words spatial recession, a method much used subsequently by the renowned Golden Age, Dutch landscape painters, who would most likely have become acquainted with the work through prints. Both Rembrandt and Rubens paid homage to Elsheimer, with copies of his painting and Rubens, who was also living in Rome at the time, was almost certainly acquainted with him. In fact, it is known that Rubens tried unsuccessfully to purchase the painting after Elsheimer's premature death. His meticulous representation of the natural world through biblical narratives would become a pivotal moment in the development of Western European landscape painting, commencing with the Dutch Golden Age landscape painters, Salomon van Ruysdael, Jan van Goyen, Jacob van Ruisdael and Aelbert Cuyp.

The final image is an early example of the Dutch river landscapes, which painters such as Salomon van Ruysdael made famous. *A River Landscape with Fishermen drawing a Net*, painted in 1632, is an early example of many such depictions, where a river and the trees on the bank form a wedge-shaped landscape, running across the picture-plane, leading one's eye into the depths of the composition, creating the illusion of spatial recession.

