Paolo Uccello (1397 – 10 December 1475), born Paolo di Dono, was an Italian painter and a mathematician who was notable for his pioneering work on visual perspective in art. Giorgio Vasari in his book Lives of the Artists wrote that Uccello was obsessed by his interest in perspective and would stay up all night in his study trying to grasp the exact vanishing point. He used perspective in order to create a feeling of depth in his paintings and not, as his contemporaries, to narrate different or succeeding stories. His best known works are the three paintings representing the battle of San Romano (for a long time these were wrongly entitled the "Battle of Sant' Egidio of 1416").

Paolo worked in the Late Gothic tradition, and emphasized colour and pageantry rather than the Classical realism that other artists were pioneering. His style is best described as idiosyncratic, and he left no school of followers. He has had some influence on twentieth century art (including the New Zealand painter Melvin Day) and literary criticism (e.g., in the "Vies imaginaires" by Marcel Schwob, "Uccello le poil" by Antonin Artaud and "O Mundo Como Ideia" by Bruno Tolentino).

**Life**

The sources for Paolo Uccello’s life are few: Giorgio Vasari’s biography, written 75 years after Paolo’s death, and a few contemporary official documents. Uccello was born in Pratovecchio in 1397.[1] His tax declarations for some years indicate that he was born in 1397, but in 1446 he claimed to be born in 1396.[2] His nickname Uccello came from his fondness for painting birds. His father, Dono di Paolo, was a barber-surgeon from Pratovecchio near Arezzo; his mother, Antonia, was a high-born Florentine.

At the age of ten, he was apprenticed to the famous sculptor Lorenzo Ghiberti, designer of the doors of the Florence Baptistery, whose workshop was the premier centre for Florentine art at the time. Ghiberti's late-Gothic, narrative style and sculptural composition greatly influenced Paolo. It was also around this time that Paolo began his lifelong
friendship with Donatello. In 1414 Uccello was admitted to the painters' guild *Compagnia di San Luca* and just one year later, in 1415, he joined the official painter's guild of Florence *Arte dei Medici e degli Speziali*. By the mid 1420s the young Uccello probably left Ghiberti's workshop. He stayed on good terms with his master and may have been privy to the designs for Ghiberti's second set of Baptistery doors, *The Gates of Paradise*. These featured a battle scene, "that might well have impressed itself in the mind of the young Uccello ", and thus influenced *The Battle of San Romano*.³

According to Vasari, Uccello's first painting was a Saint Anthony between the saints Cosmas and Damianus, a commission for the hospital of Lelmo. Next he painted two figures in the convent of Annalena. Shortly afterwards he painted three frescoes with scenes from *the life of Saint Francis* above the left door of the Santa Trinita church. For the Santa Maria Maggiore church he painted a fresco of the Annunciation. In this fresco, he painted a large building with columns in perspective. Vasari writes that people thought this was a great and beautiful achievement.

Paolo painted *the Lives of the Church Fathers* in the cloisters of the church of San Miniato, on a hill overlooking Florence. For this fresco he used unusual colours (blue pastures, red bricks and different colours for the buildings) as a protest against his monotonous meals served by the abbot: cheese pies and cheese soup. In the end Paolo felt so miserable that he ran away. He only finished the job after the abbot promised to serve him normal meals.

Uccello was asked to paint a number of scenes of distempered animals for the house of the Medici. His depiction of a fierce lion fighting with a venom-spouting snake was especially appreciated by Vasari. Uccello loved to paint animals and he kept a large number of pictures of all kinds of animals, especially birds, at home. Because he was so fond of birds, he was aptly nicknamed Paolo Uccelli (Paul of the birds).

By 1424 Paolo was earning his own living as a painter. In that year he painted episodes of the *Creation and expulsion* for the Green Cloister (*Chiostro Verde*) of Santa Maria Novella in Florence (now badly damaged), proving his artistic maturity. Again, he was able to paint in a lively manner a large number of animals. As he succeeded in painting trees in their natural colours, in contrast with many of his predecessors, he began to acquire a reputation for painting landscapes. He continued with scenes from the Deluge, the story of Noah's Ark, Noah's sacrifice and Noah's drunkenness. These scenes brought him great fame in Florence.

Around this time he was taught geometry by Antonio Manetti.
In 1425, Uccello travelled to Venice, where he worked on the mosaics for the façade of San Marco (all these works have been lost). Some suggest he visited Rome with his friend Donatello before returning to Florence in 1431. He also painted some frescoes in the Prato Cathedral and Bologna.

In 1432 the Office of Works asked the Florentine ambassador in Venice to enquire after Uccello's reputation as an artist. Uccello remained in Florence for most of the rest of his life, executing works for various churches and patrons, most notably the Duomo. In 1436 he was given the commission for the monochromatic fresco of Sir John Hawkwood. In this equestrian monument he showed his keen interest in perspective. The condottiere and his horse are presented as if the fresco was a sculpture, seen from below.

If, as is widely thought, he is the author of the frescoes Stories of the Virgin and Story of Saint Stephen in the Cappella dell'Assunta, Florence, then he would have visited nearby Prato sometime between 1435 and 1440. In 1443, he painted the figures on the clock of the Duomo. In the same year and in 1444 he designed a few stained glass windows for the same church. In 1444 he was also at work in Padua, and he travelled to Padua again in 1445 at Donatello's invitation.

Back in Florence in 1446, he painted the Green Stations of the Cross, again for the cloister of the church Santa Maria Novella. Around 1447–1454 he painted Scenes of Monastic Life for the church San Miniato al Monte, Florence.

Around 1450–1456 he painted his three most famous paintings The Battle of San Romano, the victory of the Florentine army over the Sienese in 1432, for the Palazzo Medici in Florence. The extraordinarily foreshortened forms extending in many planes accentuate Uccello's virtuosity as a draftsman, and provides a controlled visual structure to the chaos of the battle scene.
Uccello was married to Tommasa Malifici by 1453, because in that year Donato (named after Donatello) was born, and in 1456 his wife gave birth to Antonia. In 1465, Uccello was in Urbino with his son Donato, where he was engaged until 1469, working for the Confraternity of Corpus Domini, a brotherhood of laymen. He painted the predella for their new altarpiece with the Miracle of the Profaned Host. (The main panel representing the "Communion of the Apostles" was commissioned to Justus van Ghent and finished in 1474.) Uccello's predella comprises six meticulous, naturalistic scenes related to the antisemitic myth of host desecration, based on a supposed event in Paris in 1290. It has been suggested that the subject of the main panel, on which Duke Frederick of Montefeltro of Urbino appears in the background conversing with an Oriental, is related to the antisemitic intention of the predella. Federico allowed a small Jewish community to live in Urbino. Not all these scenes are unanimously attributed to Paolo Uccello.

In his Florentine tax return of August 1469 he declared: "I find myself old and ailing, my wife is ill, and I can no longer work." In his last years, he was a lonesome, forgotten man, afraid of hardship in life. His last known work is The Hunt, c. 1470. He made his testament on 11 November 1475 and died shortly afterwards at the age of 78 on 10 December 1475 at the hospital of Florence. He was buried in his father's tomb in the Florentine church of Santo Spirito.

With his precise, analytical mind he tried to apply a scientific method to depict objects in three-dimensional space. In particular, some of his studies of the perspective foreshortening of the torus are preserved, and one standard display of drawing skill was his depictions of the mazzocchio. The perspective in his paintings has influenced famous painters such as Piero della Francesca, Albrecht Dürer and Leonardo da Vinci, to name a few.

His daughter Antonia Uccello (1456–1491) was a Carmelite nun, whom Giorgio Vasari called "a daughter who knew how to draw". She was even noted as a "pittoressa", a paintress, on her death certificate. Her style and her skill remains a mystery as none of her work is extant.
Works

Pope-Hennessy is far more conservative than the Italian authors: he attributes some of the works below to a "Prato Master" and a "Karlsruhe Master". Most of the dates in the list (taken from Borsi and Borsi) are derived from stylistic comparison rather than from documentation.

- **Annunciation** (c. 1420–1425) - Ashmolean Museum, Oxford
- **Creation and Fall** (c. 1424–1425) - Lunette and lower section, Chiostro Verde, Santa Maria Novella, Florence
- **Adoration of the Magi** (c. 1431–1432) - Staattliche Kunsthalle, Karlsruhe
- **St George and the Dragon** (c. 1431) - National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
- **Quarate Predella** (c. 1433) - Museo diocesano di Santo Stefano al Ponte, Florence
- **Frescos in the Capella dell' Assunta** (c. 1434–1435) - Duomo, Prato
- **Nun-Saint with Two Children** (c. 1434–1435) - Contini-Bonacosi Collection, Florence
- **Funerary Monument to Sir John Hawkwood** (c. 1436) - Duomo, Florence
- **The Battle of San Romano**, consisting of:
  - **Battle of San Romano: Niccolò da Tolentino** (c. 1450–1456) - National Gallery, London
  - **Battle of San Romano: Bernadino della Ciarda unhorsed** (c. 1450–1456) - Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence
  - **Battle of San Romano: Micheletto da Cotignola** (c. 1450) - Musée du Louvre, Paris
  - **St George and the Dragon** (c. 1439–1440) - Musée Jacquemart-André, Paris
  - **Clock Face with Four Prophets/Evangelists** (1443) - Duomo, Florence
  - **Resurrection** (1443–1444) - stained glass window, Duomo, Florence
  - **Nativity** (1443–1444) - stained glass window, Duomo, Florence
  - **Story of Noah** (c. 1447) - lunette and lower section, Chiostro Verde, Santa Maria Novella, Florence
  - **Scenes of Monastic Life** (c. 1447–1454) - S. Miniato al Monte, Florence
  - **Saint George and the Dragon** (c. 1450-55) - National Gallery, London
  - **Crucifixion** (c. 1457–1458) - Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection, Madrid
  - **Life of the Holy Fathers** (c. 1460–1465) - Accademia, Florence
  - **Miracle of the Profaned Host** (1467–1468) - predella, Galleria Nazionale delle Marche, Palazzo Ducale, Urbino
  - **The Hunt in the Forest** (c. 1470) - Ashmolean Museum, Oxford
References

[1] Private Life of a Masterpiece, BBC TV
[3] Private Life of a Masterpiece BBC TV

Sources


External links

- Excerpts from Vasari’s Life of Paolo Uccello (http://easyweb.easynet.co.uk/giorgio.vasari/uccello/uccello.htm)
- Florence Art Guide: Paolo Uccello (http://www.mega.it/eng/egui/pers/pucc.htm)
- www.paolouccello.org - Works by Paolo Uccello (http://www.paolouccello.org)
- Paolo Uccello Homepage (http://www.fionline.it/paolouccello/) (in Italian)
- Paolo Uccello's Polyhedra (http://www.georgehart.com/virtual-polyhedra/uccello.html)
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