

Brunelleschi and Linear Perspective

Smart History

Brunelleschi and the Rediscovery of Linear Perspective

Before we look at painting in the Early Renaissance, we need to learn about one of the most important discoveries of the modern world: the rediscovery of linear perspective in 1420 by Filippo Brunelleschi (we say rediscovery, because the ancient Greeks and Romans knew it too, but knowledge of it had been lost in the Middle Ages). Linear perspective is a way of creating a convincing, perfect illusion of space on a flat, or two-dimensional surface.

Think about it: This is what nearly every Renaissance artist wanted—a way of creating an illusion of space—one of the most important aspects of making paintings look realistic!

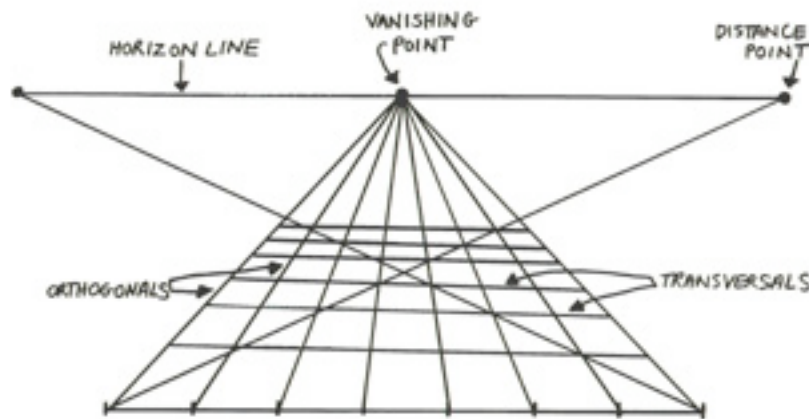


Figure 1. Here is a diagram of the main elements of linear perspective—a horizon line, a vanishing point, and orthogonals.

When Brunelleschi rediscovered this in 1420, Florentine painters and sculptors became obsessed with it, especially after detailed instructions for using linear perspective were included in a painting manual written by a fellow Florentine, Leon Battista Alberti, in 1435.

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John Berger, an art historian, notes that the convention of perspective fits within Renaissance Humanism because it "it structured all images of reality to address a single spectator who, unlike God, could only be in one place at a time." In other words, linear perspective eliminates the multiple viewpoints that we see in medieval art, and creates an illusion of space from a single, fixed viewpoint. This suggests a renewed focus on the individual viewer, and we know that individualism is an important part of the Humanism of the Renaissance.

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