Realism

Humanists were not the only group interested in recovering antiquity. Artists also participated in rediscovering antiquity. An increasing number of drawings of classical ruins and studies of classical sculpture helped artists place the human figure in a realistic depiction of his or her surroundings. Artists also borrowed classical motifs from mythological stories to classical architecture—framing the movement, gestures, and emotions of their human subjects, both worldly and divine. Artists had a commitment to realism of space and the ways in which human figures were portrayed, paying close attention to proportions and facial expressions. The Florentine artist Giotto di Bondone (1266/76-1337) initiated this move toward realism, seen most clearly in his series of frescoes on the life of the Virgin in the Scrovegni chapel in Padua. Throughout the series, Giotto frames full-scale human figures with architecture and natural reliefs such as mountains. The figures interact with and revolve in the environment in which Giotto depicts them. Moreover, each scene focuses on the emotion of the moment. For example, Jesus stare calmly at Judas, and Judas betrays him, breaking the action of the embrace. In another scene, one sees the grief of the Virgin and Mary Magdalene as Jesus’s body is brought down from the cross. The angels, positioned above the body, also grieve. In a scene depicting the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise by the painter Masaccio (1401-1428) in the Branacci Chapel at the Church of Santa Maria del Carmine in Florence, the painting conveys the emotion of grief. Eve, her face full of despair, turns her eyes upward toward God, while Adam hangs his head and covers his eyes in shame at the realization of the pair’s new reality. Distant and remote figures and stories are given new life and a new connection to the reality of human experience.

The use of perspective greatly enhanced the artist’s drive to capture reality. Painters used perspective to depict the world as one saw it. They focused, as Leon Battista Alberti instructed in his 1433 treatise *On Painting*, on how the eye actually sees, bringing the rays of the eye to bear on the painted surface with the help of a mathematical grid. Alberti encouraged the “visual pyramid,” which had its tip at the vanishing point with the main subject filling the space between the lines that extended upward on an angle from that point. One example of the use of the “visual pyramid” is Masaccio’s *Trinità*. Completed before Alberti’s treatise, Masaccio’s *Trinità* nevertheless displays the very features of perspective that Alberti wishes all painters would master. In this fresco of the crucified Jesus with the Father behind him, a white dove—symbolizing the Holy Spirit—appears between them. The figures are framed by a barrel vault, creating deep space. The vanishing point is behind the crucified Jesus’s head with the body in the geometrical triangle, extending from the lowest point of the vertical cross up to each of the column capitals at each end of the vault’s arch.