

## Italian and Dutch Artists

The desire to capture the visible world in reality and the way in which humans experience the world was a central goal of painters during the early Renaissance. In Italy, this goal was expressed largely by framing human forms with architectural and natural structures, showing how they interact and revolve within these structures. The human figures express emotion and personality through movement, gesture, and facial expression while doing so. Many of these scenes were frescoes, painted on walls, allowing artists to employ a large space to execute the principles of linear perspective and to achieve the narrative quality for which the Renaissance is known.

In the Netherlands, painters captured the reality of human experience in their own way. While paying close attention to realistic and proportional human form, painters focused on details. Nevertheless, for both Italian and Dutch painters, the goal was the same: to depict human experience in a realistic way. In Dutch and Flemish painting of the period, the context in which human forms appeared is what made the scene lifelike, especially the details of domestic life. Painters executed the details through the use of oil paint. While oil paint was known throughout the Middle Ages, it was mostly used for special surfaces, such as painting stone or metal. During the Renaissance, painters used it as a primary medium to paint on flat surfaces of canvas and wood. Oil paint was capable of creating richer and deeper colors, especially when several layers were applied. At the same time, the use of oil paint could produce a hazy effect by glazing, much like the eye interacting with objects in the distance. Painters used light and color to create depth, contrasting light and dark to depict close and far subjects. This technique of atmospheric perspective (with the use of light and dark) captured the sense of space with distant shapes appearing as if filtered through the natural environment.

Dutch and Flemish artists' attention to detail, especially in the domestic setting, can be seen in the *Arnolfini Marriage* (1434) by Jan Van Eyck (c. 1390-1441). This is a portrait of a real couple. Arnolfini was an Italian merchant, and his bride was a fellow merchant's daughter. They are posed in a domestic setting and two witnesses, one of whom is perhaps Jan Van Eyck himself, are seen through the reflection of a convex mirror behind the couple's heads. No detail is spared. The folds of the drapery, the bride's intricate headdress, and the hem of the bride's sleeves are meticulously reproduced. A realistic chandelier contains a single lit candle. A small dog waits by the couple's feet. A pair of wooden clogs lay off to the side of the couple. The scene is illuminated by a shaft of light from an open window, finely distinguishing between the interior and exterior. This type of detail and attention to the domestic context continued through the period. An even narrower focus manifested itself in the development of still life paintings, taking a bowl of fruit or a display of flowers, contrasting light and dark to bring out shadows and the intricacies of the singular image. Distinguishing between the interior and exterior also led to the development of a new genre, one that focused totally on the exterior: the landscape. In Pieter Bruegel's (c. 1525-1569) *The Harvesters* (1565), the subject is the land itself. The painting depicts vast space, golden wheat fields,

harvested produce, and green grass. Field workers serve to highlight features of the landscape. They are proportional to the vastness of the space, appearing small. The wheat stalks that the field workers pass through are almost of equal height. Trees, hedges, and water appear in the distance, meeting the sky in the background.

