

THE RENAISSANCE, THE REDISCOVERY OF PERSPECTIVE, AND THE ORIGINS OF ANAMORPHOSIS

The Florentines were extremely proud of this invention [perspective], which they thought ... was unknown to antiquity... But has it anything to do with civilisation? When it was first invented I think it had. The belief that one could represent a man in a real setting and calculate his position and arrange figures in a demonstrably harmonious order, expressed symbolically a new idea about man's place in the scheme of things and man's control over his own destiny. (Kenneth Clark, *Civilisation*)

Renaissance means re-birth, and the years between about 1400 and 1550, first in Italy and then spreading to other countries, are without doubt one of the most significant periods in the history of Europe. Renaissance artists—and especially Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, and Raphael—are still today world-famous. It began in the city of Florence, where, under the rule of intelligent and enlightened leaders, there was a rediscovery of the ancient civilisations of Rome and Greece in all their aspects: politics, philosophy, science, literature, architecture, art. After centuries of cultural thought focused on the inadequacy of humanity relative to the divine, the Florentines celebrated the power of humanity: “Man is the measure of all things”.

The art of *perspective*, the representation of 3-dimensional space on a flat surface, was certainly known in ancient times, but this knowledge was “lost and forgotten for centuries. Byzantium was the artistic centre of Christendom for 1,000 years, and in Byzantine art... the third dimension is eliminated... Figures and objects are flat abstract symbols set on flat neutral surfaces. A pictured man does not represent a physical body, but a human spirit, having no volume, depth or position in space. The real world no longer features in the background; there is no horizon” (Wright, *Perspective in Perspective*).

In Florence, over a period of about a hundred years, artists rediscovered the art of perspective, and learnt its geometrical rules. From the viewpoint of the 21st century, where we bathe constantly in a sea of static and moving images, we can hardly appreciate what a revolution in art this was. However, compare the following two views of a city: the first is painted in the Byzantine “flat surface” tradition; the second, by the Renaissance artist Piero della Francesca, uses a very precise perspective construction to create a feeling of spatial depth, of “reality”, that is overwhelming.