

THE RENAISSANCE: THE BEGINNING OF MODERN PAINTING

In the early 1400s, the world woke up. From its beginnings in Florence, Italy, *this renaissance, or rebirth, of culture spread to Rome and Venice, then, in 1500, to the rest of Europe (known as the Northern Renaissance): the Netherlands, Germany, France, Spain, and England.*

Common elements were the rediscovery of the art and literature of Greece and Rome, the scientific study of the body and the natural world, and the intent to reproduce the forms of nature realistically.

Aided by new technical knowledge like the study of anatomy, artists achieved new heights in portraiture, landscape, and mythological and religious paintings. As skills increased, the prestige of the artist soared, reaching its peak during the High Renaissance (1500–1520) with megastars like Leonardo, Michelangelo, and Raphael.

During the Renaissance, such things as the exploration of new continents and scientific research boosted man's belief in himself, while, at the same time, the Protestant Reformation decreased the sway of the church. As a result, the study of God the Supreme Being was replaced by the study of the human being. From the minutely detailed, realistic portraits of Jan van Eyck, to the emotional intensity of Dürer's woodcuts and engravings, to the contorted bodies and surreal lighting of El Greco, art was the means to explore all facets of life on earth.

THE TOP FOUR BREAKTHROUGHS

During the Renaissance, technical innovations and creative discoveries made possible new styles of representing reality. The major breakthroughs were the change from tempera paint on wood panels and fresco on plaster walls to oil on stretched canvas and the use of perspective, giving weight and depth to form; the use of light and shadow, as opposed to simply drawing lines; and pyramidal composition in paintings.

1. OIL ON STRETCHED CANVAS. Oil on canvas became the medium of choice during the Renaissance. With this method, a mineral like lapis lazuli was ground fine, then mixed with turpentine and oil to be applied as oil paint. A greater range



of rich colors with smooth gradations of tone permitted painters to represent textures and simulate three-dimensional form.

2. PERSPECTIVE. One of the most significant discoveries in the history of art was the method for creating the illusion of depth on a flat surface called "perspective," which became a foundation of European painting for the next 500 years. Linear perspective created the optical effect of objects receding in the distance through lines that appear to converge at a single point in the picture known as the vanishing point. (In Masaccio's "The Tribute Money," lines converge behind the head of Christ.) Painters also reduced the size of objects and muted colors or blurred detail as objects got farther away.



Hans Holbein the Younger, "The French Ambassadors," 1533, NG, London. *This portrait of two "universal men" expressed the versatility of the age. Objects like globes, compasses, sundials, lute, and hymnbook show wide-ranging interests from mathematics to music. Holbein fully exploited all the technical discoveries of the Renaissance: the lessons of composition, anatomy, realistic depiction of the human form through light and dark, lustrous color, and flawless perspective.*

Masaccio, "The Tribute Money," c. 1427, Santa Maria del Carmine, Florence. *Masaccio revolutionized painting through his use of perspective, a consistent source of light, and three-dimensional portrayal of the human figure.*

3. THE SKEW
nique
emerge
on a fla

4. PYRA
on a ho
dimension
to a climax
is the figure

THE EARL
The Renaiss
(15th-centu
Masaccio a
the painter
ment.

MASACCIO.
cornerstone
(pronounc
because he
first since C
Gothic style
"Masaccio
tions were a
light casting

DONATELLO.
discovery of
turned. Don
His "I
"Mary Mag
aged Magda
artist was sa



3. THE USE OF LIGHT AND SHADOW. Chiaroscuro (pronounced key arrow SKEWR o), which means “light/dark” in Italian, referred to the new technique for modeling forms in painting by which lighter parts seemed to emerge from darker areas, producing the illusion of rounded, sculptural relief on a flat surface.

4. PYRAMID CONFIGURATION. Rigid profile portraits and grouping of figures on a horizontal grid in the picture’s foreground gave way to a more three-dimensional “pyramid configuration.” This symmetrical composition builds to a climax at the center, as in Leonardo’s “Mona Lisa,” where the focal point is the figure’s head.

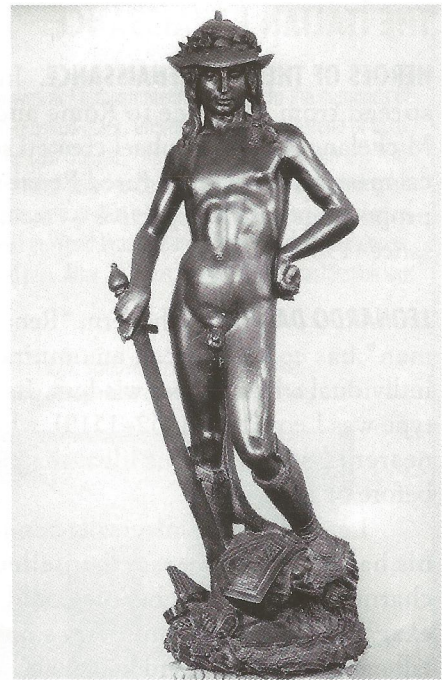
THE EARLY RENAISSANCE: THE FIRST THREE HALL-OF-FAMERS

The Renaissance was born in Florence. The triumvirate of quattrocento (15th-century) geniuses who invented this new style included the painter Masaccio and sculptor Donatello, who reintroduced naturalism to art, and the painter Botticelli, whose elegant linear figures reached a height of refinement.

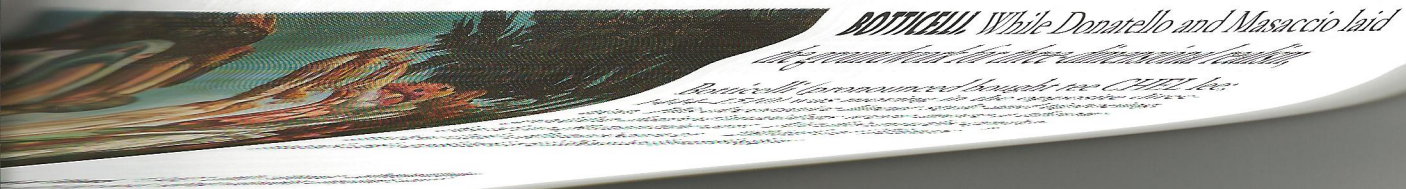
MASACCIO. The founder of Early Renaissance painting, which became the cornerstone of European painting for more than six centuries, was Masaccio (pronounced ma SAHT chee oh; 1401–28). Nicknamed “Sloppy Tom” because he neglected his appearance in his pursuit of art, Masaccio was the first since Giotto to paint the human figure not as a linear column, in the Gothic style, but as a real human being. As a Renaissance painter, Vasari said, “Masaccio made his figures stand upon their feet.” Other Masaccio innovations were a mastery of perspective and his use of a single, constant source of light casting accurate shadows.

DONATELLO. What Masaccio did for painting, Donatello (1386–1466) did for sculpture. His work recaptured the central discovery of Classical sculpture: contrapposto, or weight concentrated on one leg with the rest of the body relaxed, often turned. Donatello carved figures and draped them realistically with a sense of their underlying skeletal structure.

His “David” was the first life-size, freestanding nude sculpture since the Classical period. The brutal naturalism of “Mary Magdalen” was even more probing, harshly accurate, and “real” than ancient Roman portraits. He carved the aged Magdalen as a gaunt, shriveled hag, with stringy hair and hollowed eyes. Donatello’s sculpture was so lifelike, the artist was said to have shouted at it, “Speak, speak, or the plague take you!”



Donatello, “David,” c. 1430–32, Museo Nazionale, Florence. Donatello pioneered the Renaissance style of sculpture with rounded body masses.



BOTTICELLI While Donatello and Masaccio laid

THE ITALIAN RENAISSANCE

HEROES OF THE HIGH RENAISSANCE. In the sixteenth century, artistic leadership spread from Florence to Rome and Venice, where giants like Leonardo, Michelangelo, and Raphael created sculpture and paintings with total technical mastery. Their work fused Renaissance discoveries like composition, ideal proportions, and perspective — a culmination referred to as the High Renaissance (1500–1520).

LEONARDO DA VINCI. The term “Renaissance man” has come to mean an omnitalented individual who radiates wisdom. Its prototype was Leonardo (1452–1519), who came nearer to achieving this ideal than anyone before or since.

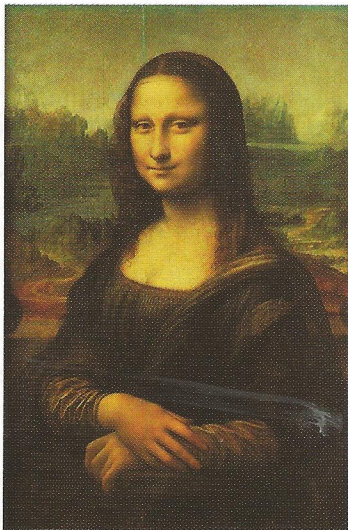
Leonardo was universally admired for his handsome appearance, intellect, and charm. His “personal beauty could not be exaggerated,” a contemporary said of this tall man with long blond hair, “whose every movement was grace itself, and whose abilities were so extraordinary that he could readily solve every difficulty.” As if this were not enough, Leonardo could sing “divinely” and “his charming conversation won all hearts.”

An avid mountain climber who delighted in scaling great heights, Leonardo was also fascinated with flight. Whenever he saw caged birds, he paid the owner to set them free. He frequently sketched fluttering wings in his notebooks, where he constantly designed flying contraptions that he eventually built and strapped on himself in hopes of soaring. He once wrote, “I wish to work miracles,” an ambition evident in his inventions: a machine to move mountains, a parachute, a helicopter, an armored tank, and a diving bell.

Leonardo did more to create the concept of the artist-genius than anyone else. When he began his campaign, the artist was considered a menial craftsman. By constantly stressing the intellectual aspects of art and creativity, Leonardo transformed the artist’s public status into, as he put it, a “Lord and God.”

His brilliance had one flaw. The contemporary painter Vasari called Leonardo “capricious and fickle.” His curiosity was so omnivorous that distractions constantly lured him from one incomplete project to another. When commissioned to paint an altarpiece, he first had to study tidal movements in the Adriatic, then invent systems to prevent landslides. A priest said Leonardo was so obsessed with his mathematical experiments “that he cannot stand his brushes.”

Less than 20 completed works by Leonardo survive. He died at age 67 in France, where he had been summoned by Francis I for the sole duty of conversing with the king. On his deathbed, said Vasari, Leonardo admitted “he had offended God and mankind by not working at his art as he should have.”



Leonardo, “Mona Lisa,” or “La Gioconda,” 1503–6, Louvre, Paris. *The world’s most famous portrait embodied all the Renaissance discoveries of perspective, anatomy, and composition.*

MONA LISA

It hung in Napoleon’s bedroom until moving to the Louvre in 1804. It caused traffic jams in New York when 1.6 million people jostled to see it in seven weeks. In Tokyo viewers were allowed ten seconds. The object of all this attention was the world’s most famous portrait, “Mona Lisa.”

Historically, she was nobody special, probably the young wife of a Florentine merchant named Giocondo (the prefix “Mona” was an abbreviation of Madonna, or Mrs.). The portrait set the standard for High Renaissance paintings in many important ways. The use of perspective, with all lines converging on a single vanishing point behind Mona Lisa’s head, and triangular composition established the importance of geometry in painting. It diverged from the stiff, profile portraits that had been the norm by displaying the subject in a relaxed, natural, three-quarter pose. For his exact knowledge of anatomy so evident in the Mona Lisa’s hands, Leonardo had lived in a hospital, studying skeletons and dissecting more than thirty cadavers.

One of the first easel paintings intended to be framed and hung on a wall, the “Mona Lisa” fully realized the potential of the new oil medium. Instead of proceeding from outlined figures, as painters did before, Leonardo used chiaroscuro to model features through light and shadow. Starting with dark undertones, he built the illusion of three-dimensional features through layers and layers of thin, semi-transparent glazes (Even the Mona Lisa’s pupils were composed of successive gauzy washes of pigment). This “sfumato” technique rendered the whole, as Leonardo said, “without lines or borders, in the manner of smoke.” His colors ranged from light to dark in a continuous gradation of subtle tones, without crisp separating edges. The forms seemed to emerge from, and melt into, shadows.

And then there’s that famous smile. To avoid the solemnity of most formal portraits, Leonardo engaged musicians and jesters to amuse his subject. Although he frequently left his works incomplete because of frustration when his hand could not match his imagination, this work was instantly hailed as a masterpiece, influencing generations of artists. In 1911 an Italian worker, outraged that the supreme achievement of Italian art resided in France, stole the painting from the Louvre to return it to its native soil. “Mona Lisa” was recovered from the patriotic thief’s dingy room two years later in Florence.

By 1952 more than 61 versions of the Mona Lisa had been created. From Marcel Duchamp’s goateed portrait in 1919 to Andy Warhol’s silkscreen series and Jasper Johns’s image in 1983, the Mona Lisa is not only the most admired, but also the most reproduced, image in all art.

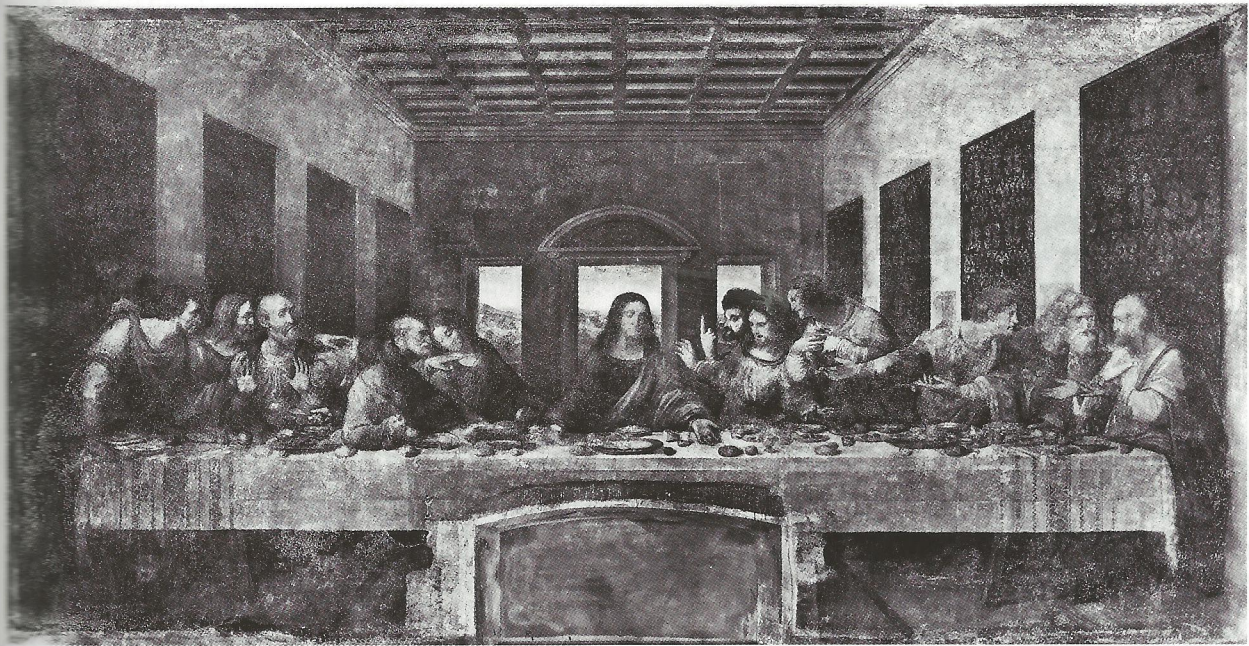
THE LAST SUPPER

If "Mona Lisa" is Leonardo's most famous portrait, his fresco painting, "The Last Supper," has for five centuries been the world's most revered religious painting. Leonardo declared the artist has two aims: to paint the "man and the intention of his soul." Here he revolutionized art by capturing both, particularly what was going through each figure's mind.

Leonardo immortalized the dramatic moment after Christ announced one of his disciples would betray him, with each reacting emotionally and asking, "Lord, is it I?" Through a range of gesture and expression, Leonardo revealed for the first time in art the fundamental character and psychological state of each apostle. His use of perspective, with all diagonal lines converging on Christ's head, fixed Christ as the apex of the pyramidal composition.

Unfortunately, Leonardo was not temperamentally suited to the demands of traditional fresco painting, which required quick, unerring brushwork instead of accumulated blurred shadings. In "The Last Supper," he experimented with an oil/tempera emulsion of his own invention that failed to bond to the plaster. Even during his lifetime, the mural began to disintegrate. It didn't help that the building was used as a stable and then partly destroyed in World War II. Behind a barricade of sandbags, mildew reduced the fresco to a sad ruin. After 20 years, an inch-by-inch restoration was completed in 1999.

Leonardo, "The Last Supper," c. 1495, Santa Maria delle Grazie, Milan.
Leonardo revealed the disciples' character through facial expressions and gestures.



Leonardo, "In the Womb,"
c. 1510, Royal
Collection,
Windsor Castle.

The Notebooks

Evidence of Leonardo's fertile imagination lies in the thousands of pages of sketches and ideas in his notebooks. His interests and expertise encompassed anatomy, engineering, astronomy, mathematics, natural history, music, sculpture, architecture, and painting, making him one of the most versatile geniuses ever. Although the notes were unknown to later scientists, Leonardo anticipated many of the major discoveries and inventions of succeeding centuries. He built canals, installed central heating, drained marshes, studied air currents, and invented a printing press, telescope, and portable bombs. From his study of blood vessels, he developed the theory of circulation 100 years before Harvey. He was the first to design a flying machine and first to illustrate the interior workings of the human body. His sketches of the growth of the fetus in the womb were so accurate they could teach embryology to medical students today.

MICHELANGELO: THE DIVINE M. As an infant, Michelangelo (1475–1564) was cared for by a wet nurse whose husband was a stonecutter. The boy grew up absorbed with carving, drawing, and art, even though his family beat him severely to force him into a “respectable” profession. But the Medici prince Lorenzo the Magnificent recognized the boy’s talent and, at the age of 15, took Michelangelo to his Florentine court, where the budding artist lived like a son.

Michelangelo did more than anyone to elevate the status of the artist. Believing that creativity was divinely inspired, he broke all rules. Admirers addressed him as the “divine Michelangelo,” but the price for his gift was solitude. Michelangelo once asked his rival, the gregarious Raphael, who was always surrounded by courtiers, “Where are you going in such company, as happy as a Monsignor?” Raphael shot back, “Where are you going, all alone like a hangman?”

Michelangelo refused to train apprentices or allow anyone to watch him work. When someone said it was too bad he never married and had heirs, Michelangelo responded, “I’ve always had only too harassing a wife in this demanding art of mine, and the works I leave behind will be my sons.” He was emotional, rough and uncouth, happy only when working or hewing rock at the marble quarry. His wit could be cruel, as when he was asked why the ox in another artist’s painting was so much more convincing than other elements. “Every painter,” Michelangelo said, “does a good self-portrait.”

An architect, sculptor, painter, poet, and engineer, Michelangelo acknowledged no limitations. He once wanted to carve an entire mountain into a colossus. Michelangelo lived until nearly 90, carving until he died. His deathbed words: “I regret that I am dying just as I am beginning to learn the alphabet of my profession.”

WHO PAID THE BILLS?

Before there were art galleries and museums, artists depended on the patronage system not only to support themselves but to provide expensive materials for their work. Under the inspired taste of Lorenzo the Magnificent, this resulted in an entire city — Florence — becoming a work of art, as wealthy rulers commissioned lavish buildings and art. Yet, significantly, the word for “patron” is the same in both French and Italian as the word for “boss.” With irascible artists like Michelangelo, the tension between being a creator and being told what to create erupted in ugliness. The best example of the strengths and weaknesses of the system was Michelangelo’s testy

relation to his Medici patrons.

Michelangelo owed his training to Lorenzo de’ Medici, but Lorenzo’s insensitive son ordered the maestro to sculpt a statue out of snow in the palazzo courtyard. Years later, Medici popes Leo X and Clement VII (the sculptor worked for seven of the thirteen popes who reigned during his lifetime) hired Michelangelo to drop other work and sculpt tomb statues for their relatives. When the stone faces of the deceased bore no resemblance to actual appearance, Michelangelo would brook no interference with his ideal concept, saying that, in 100 years, no one would care what his actual subjects looked like. Unfortunately, the works remain unfinished, for his fickle patrons constantly changed their minds, abruptly

ly cancelling, without explanation and often without pay, projects Michelangelo worked on for years.

Michelangelo’s worst taskmaster was Pope Julius II, the “warrior-pope” who was bent on restoring the temporal power of the papacy. Julius had grandiose designs for his own tomb, which he envisioned as the centerpiece of a rebuilt St. Peter’s Cathedral. He first commissioned Michelangelo to create forty life-size marble statues to decorate a mammoth two-story structure. The project tormented Michelangelo for forty years as Julius and his relatives gradually whittled down the design and interrupted his progress with distracting assignments. When referring to the commission, Michelangelo darkly called it the “Tragedy of the Tomb.”

Michelangelo, “Pietà,”

1498/99–1500, St. Peter’s, Rome.
Michelangelo’s first masterpiece groups Christ and the Virgin in a pyramidal composition.



THE SCULPTOR. Of all artists, Michelangelo felt the sculptor was most godlike. God created life from clay, and the sculptor unlocked beauty from stone. He described his technique as “liberating the figure from the marble that imprisons it.” While other sculptors added pieces of marble to disguise their mistakes, Michelangelo always carved his sculptures from one block. “You could roll them down a mountain and no piece would come off,” said a fellow sculptor.

The first work to earn him renown, carved when Michelangelo was 23, was the “Pietà,” which means “pity.” The pyramidal arrangement derived from Leonardo, with the classic composure of the Virgin’s face reflecting the calm, idealized expressions of Greek sculpture. The accurate anatomy of Christ’s body is due to Michelangelo’s dissection of corpses. When first unveiled, a viewer attributed the work to a more experienced sculptor, unable to believe a young unknown could accomplish such a triumph. When Michelangelo heard, he carved his name on a ribbon across the Virgin’s breast, the only work he ever signed.

THE PAINTER: THE SISTINE CHAPEL. A few vines on a blue background — that's all Pope Julius II asked for, to spruce up the barnlike ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. What the artist gave him was more than 340 human figures (10' to 18' tall) representing the origin and fall of man — the most ambitious artistic undertaking of the whole Renaissance. The fact that Michelangelo accomplished such a feat in less than four years, virtually without assistance, was a testimonial to his single-mindedness.

Physical conditions alone presented a formidable challenge. Nearly one-half the length of a football field, the ceiling presented 10,000 square feet to be designed, sketched, plastered, and painted. The roof leaked, which made the plaster too damp. The curved shape of the barrel vault divided by cross vaults made Michelangelo's job doubly hard. In addition, he had to work on a seven-story-high scaffold in a cramped and uncomfortable position.

Despite his disdain for painting, which he considered an inferior art, Michelangelo's fresco was a culmination of figure painting, with the figures drawn not from the real world but from a world of his own creation. The nudes, which had never been painted on such a colossal scale, are simply presented, without background or ornament. As in his sculpture, the torsos are more expressive than the faces. His twisted nude forms have a relieflike quality, as if they were carved in colored stone.

Encompassing an entire wall of the Sistine Chapel is the "Last Judgment" fresco Michelangelo finished twenty-nine years after the ceiling. Its mood is strikingly gloomy. Michelangelo depicted Christ not as a merciful Redeemer but as an avenging Judge with such terrifying effect that Pope Paul III fell to his knees when he saw the fresco. "Lord, hold not my sins against me!" the pope cried. Here, too, Michelangelo showed his supreme ability to present human forms in motion, as nearly 400 contorted figures struggled, fought, and tumbled into hell.

Michelangelo, "The Creation of Adam," detail, 1508–12, Sistine Chapel, Vatican, Rome. A Zeus-like God transmits the spark of life to Adam. Michelangelo used the male nude to express every human aspiration and emotion.



Michelangelo, "The Last Judgment," detail, 1541, Sistine Chapel, Rome. St. Bartholomew, a martyr who was flayed alive, holds up his skin with a grotesque self-portrait of Michelangelo.



Michelangelo, Campidoglio, 1538–64, Rome. Michelangelo broke Renaissance rules by designing this piazza with interlocking ovals and variations from right angles.

THE ARCHITECT. In his later years, Michelangelo devoted himself to architecture, supervising the reconstruction of Rome's St. Peter's Cathedral. Given his lifelong infatuation with the body, it's no wonder Michelangelo believed "the limbs of architecture are derived from the limbs of man." Just as arms and legs flank the trunk of the human form, architectural units, he believed, should be symmetrical, surrounding a central, vertical axis.

The best example of his innovative style was the Capitoline Hill in Rome, the first great Renaissance civic center. The hill had been the symbolic heart of ancient Rome, and the pope wanted to restore it to its ancient grandeur. Two existing buildings already abutted each other at an awkward 80° angle. Michelangelo made an asset of this liability by adding another building at the same angle to flank the central Palace of Senators. He then redesigned the facade of the lateral buildings so they would be identical and left the fourth side open, with a panoramic view toward the Vatican.

Unifying the whole was a statue of Emperor Marcus Aurelius (see p. 17) on a patterned oval pavement. Renaissance architects considered the oval "unstable" and avoided it, but for Michelangelo, measure and proportion were not determined by mathematical formulae but "kept in the eyes."