

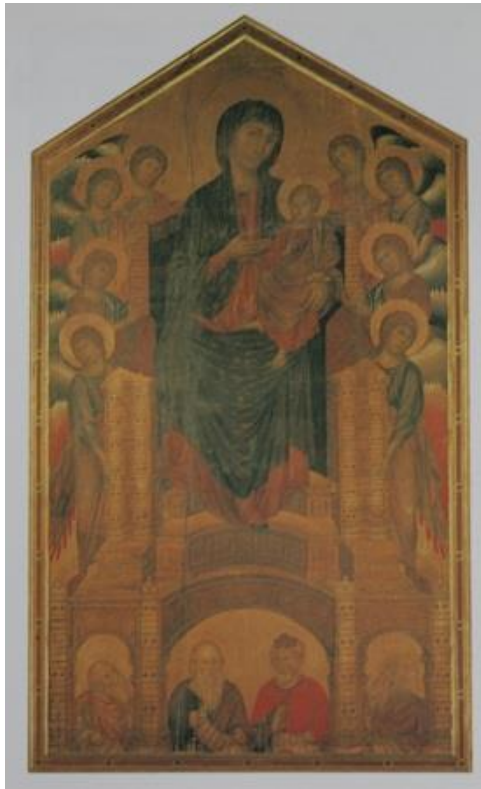
## **Research point: the accurate representation of the human figure**

For this task I must review some of the paintings that I've seen during the course from the point of view of the accurate representation of the human figure. I will study some works which I feel best represent the periods in which they were made, starting with the Byzantine tradition through to the present day. I will also observe how figures are combined to make up the artistic effect of the whole in particular in regards to the work of Eugene Delacroix.

Finally, I will also discuss if there is any tension between an art based on the classical ideal and art pursuing anatomical accuracy.

Please scroll down for the bibliography and references.

**Byzantine art and Byzantine-inspired art**



**Figure 1 *Madonna Enthroned*, c.1280-90, Cimabue. Tempera on wood. Uffizi Gallery, Florence.**



**Figure 2 *Virgin and Child and Crucifixion*, 14th century. Double-sided icon. Nicosia, Phaneromeni collection.**



**Figure 3 *The Virgin and Child enthroned with four angels*, Fra Angelico. Centre panel of an altarpiece. 1437. Perugia, Galleria Nazionale dell'Umbria.**

The first painting I have reviewed is by an Italian artist called Cimabue who was influenced by the Pisanos. The Pisanos were a family of sculptors from Southern Italy. Nicola Pisano reinvigorated Italian sculpture by combining both classical and Gothic elements. Cimabue's piece *Madonna Enthroned* is a beautiful religious work which embodies the Byzantine themes of piety and religious sense. The painting also is reminiscent of the works of Constantinople due to the inclusion of the elongated figures, majestic gestures and flowing draperies. It is a biblical scene which is evocative of the baby Jesus being born in a stable surrounded by various figures. This impression is further enhanced via the rigid frame which is shaped to mimic that of a stable/outbuilding.

The *Virgin and Child and Crucifixion* is a remarkable double-sided icon from Cyprus which is reminiscent of icons from Constantinople in terms of the bold colours and flowing draperies. The gesture and formality of the poses is also suggestive of the Island's strong links with the cultural and spiritual centre of Byzantium. The figures' visages are very soulful and moving and the expression on the Madonna's face seems to implore the viewer to delve deeper. The Cypriots traded with the Turkish and as such lots of artistic and cultural ideas were exchanged. It is certainly far more simplistic than Cimabue's earlier work, but perhaps this work was purposefully less sophisticated as it was used to inspire the direct devotion of the Cypriot people. The figures themselves are stylised and are certainly not to scale (as both heads are inaccurately depicted), however they are very much of their time. In this period people were less interested in an accurate representation of the saintly figures as they would have been expected to look otherworldly.

I have included *The Virgin and Child enthroned with four angels* by Fra Angelico as it matches the theme of the Madonna and Child present in the two preceding works. Although it is another work of a religious nature, it is a powerful piece due to the artist's skill at gesture and proportion. This work is important and marks a turning point in the history of art as it heralds the arrival of new styles in art. Angelico's figures are far more life-like and are less static and forced. The saints in the background appear to recede as the artist has rendered them smaller to give an impression of recession. The Madonna and Child still take pride of place and serve to form a triangular configuration (this has echoes of the Trinity) and also there is balance in the work as they are framed on both sides by the saints. The clothing is also beautifully rendered to suggest form and structure and overall the composition is far more coherent and believable.

### ***Christ the Universal Judge, by Michelangelo***

From the beginning of the Renaissance artists such as Michelangelo and Raphael ushered in a style of representation which was looser and freer. This is particularly evident in Michelangelo's work *Christ the Universal Judge*, which forms part of the larger scheme of *The Last Judgement*. In this work Michelangelo gives us a virtuoso performance of a melange of figures interacting with one another within a floor-to-ceiling composition. It is jaw-dropping to behold in reality and represents an incredible achievement due to the enormity of scale and ambition. Christ forms the central axis on which the rest of the figures gravitate. He raises his arm and hurls himself forward as if to decide who he shall send to heaven and who he will banish to hell forevermore. Furthermore, this work shares similarities with the earlier depictions of the Madonna, as Michelangelo imbues the figure of Christ with great majesty and importance.



**Figure 4 Christ the Universal Judge, Michelangelo. Vatican City, Sistine Chapel.**

***The Death of Sardanapalus, 1827, by Eugene Delacroix***



**Figure 5 *The Death of Sardanapalus, 1827, by Eugene Delacroix. Musée de Louvre, Paris.***

In *The Death of Sardanapalus* Delacroix depicts an allegorical scene in which the King's concubines are slayed by some intruders. It is a highly charged and chaotic scene set within the King's bed chamber. The picture follows a diagonal composition with the bed forming the centre piece. The king is depicted reclining on his bed, calmly surveying the scene as though he has just ordered the destruction of his harem. Delacroix emphasises the King's withdrawal and complete lack of interest by placing him furthest away on the far left. An impression of recession and distance is generated due to the King's diminutive size in relation to the wrestling figures in the foreground. The figures are

accurately rendered with great verve and spirit, with all manner of props and clothing rendered in delightful disarray. The image is successful as Delacroix has unified the composition, so that all of the elements come together and all of the comparative proportions are appropriate and true to life. He disliked Gericault's *Raft of the Medusa* as Gericault preferred to square up his designs piece by piece rather than observing it as a unified piece. Delacroix stated that: "However unfinished a picture may be, everything must have its relative importance" (Pool, 1985). So in Delacroix's oeuvre all of the elements were carefully conceived so as not to overwhelm the viewer and to give a greater sense of cohesion.

To summarise, there is little tension between art based on the classical ideal and art pursuing anatomical accuracy as some artists such as Delacroix have developed their works to embody both ideals. I think it is possible to explore both the classical ideal and to accurately render the human form as long as one has learnt to study from life first. I learnt to draw and paint in the classical tradition at an atelier in London, where I worked from plaster casts and still lifes and then progressed to studying the human form. To some artists this might seem a restrictive way to learn and indeed at first I thought it was too. But I have learnt to respect the Renaissance methods as my teachers taught me to observe from life and to imbue my work with a certain amount of artistic license. I agree with Delacroix that in order to produce convincing and sincere works, one must consider the whole before the parts. If an artistic unity is unpursued from the very beginning, then like Gericault our work can result in an affect which is dull, piecemeal and lacklustre.

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