Out of the Middle Ages 5
Northern Renaissance

The Northern Renaissance was the less well known Renaissance that occurred outside of Italy in the 15th and 16th centuries, with important centres in Germany, France and especially modern day Belgium and Holland.

Key differences with the Italian Renaissance:

The Northern Renaissance artists, however, were scattered about and few in number initially (very unlike their Italian counterparts). The north had fewer rich city states than did Italy. Italy, as we saw, had numerous Duchies and Republics which gave rise to a wealthy merchant class that often spent considerable funds on art. This generally wasn't the case in the north. In fact, the only notable similarity between northern Europe and Florence, lay in the Duchy of Burgundy. Burgundy, until 1477, encompassed a territory from present-day middle France northward (in an arc) to the sea, and included Flanders (in modern Belgium) and parts of the current Netherlands.

Renaissance artists in the north took a different approach to composition than Italian artists. Where an Italian artist was apt to consider scientific principles behind composition (i.e., proportion, anatomy, perspective) during the Renaissance, northern artists were more concerned with what their art looked like. Colour was of key importance, above and beyond form. In addition, detail was also very important.

Key similarities

Apart from the religious themes, the importance of new printed literature and the fact that most artists came through the guild system, the main similarity between the Northern and Italian Renaissance was the existence of an artistic centre.

In Italy, artists looked to the Republic of Florence for innovation and inspiration. In the North, the artistic hub was Flanders. Flanders was a part of the Duchy of Burgundy. It had a thriving commercial city, Bruges, which (like Florence) made its money in banking and wool. Bruges had cash aplenty to spend on luxuries like art. And (again like Florence) Burgundy, on the whole, was governed by patronage-minded rulers. Where Florence had the Medici, Burgundy had dukes.

The artists

The Northern Renaissance artist who is largely credited with developing oil techniques was Jan van Eyck, court painter to the Duke of Burgundy. It's not that he discovered oil paints, but he did figure out how to layer them, in "glazes," to create light and depth of colour in his paintings. (see his Ghent Altarpiece above) Three other key Netherlandish artists were the painters Rogier van der Weyden and Hans Memling, and the sculptor Claus Sluter. Van der Weyden, who was the town painter of Brussels, was best known for introducing accurate human emotions and gestures into his work, which was primarily of a religious nature.

Other early Northern Renaissance artists that created a lasting influence were the enigmatic Hieronymus Bosch (see detail right) and Pieter Bruegel the Elder