

## 2013 UIS Scholarship Essay

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Italian art has developed since prehistoric times. During the Roman Empire, Italy was the center of the artistic culture in Europe and the Mediterranean. The art created a universal language for this area for the first time. At some points in history, Italy was the most artistically advanced country in Europe.

An early influence in Italian art was Durante degli Alighieri, referred to as Dante. He was a major Italian poet of the Middle Ages. Dante was born in 1265. His most famous work was *La Divina Commedia* (The Divine Comedy), an allegory of life and God as revealed to a pilgrim. He wrote this in *terza rima; inferno* (Hell), *Purgatorio* (Purgatory), and *Paradiso* (Paradise). *Inferno* contains one of the most detailed literary descriptions of Hell. Descending into a dark wood where the sun is silent and sinful temptations abound, he is guided by Virgil through the nine circles of Hell. Having survived this, Dante and Virgil set out for *Purgatorio*, climbing its mountain and seven terraces that represent the seven deadly sins. He then journeys through the nine spheres of *Paradiso*. Dante started this work in 1307 and concluded in 1321, the same year that he died. Although many of his works are unfinished, Dante has had a profound influence on numerous poets, playwrights, and authors all the way up to the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

One of the most influential Italian art expressions was during the Renaissance period. The Renaissance began in Italy in the fourteenth century from revivals of humanistic literature. This rediscovery of art revolutionized European art by bringing better proportions, perspective and use of lighting. Wealthy families and papacy served as patrons for many Italian artists, including Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo.

Leonardo da Vinci was born on April 15<sup>th</sup>, 1452 in Vinci, Italy. He was concerned with the laws of science and nature which led to his work as a painter, sculptor, and inventor. At age 14, Leonardo began apprenticing with the artist Verrocchio. For the next six years he learned many skills such as leather arts, drawing and sculpting. He was then qualified as a master artist in the Guild of Saint Luke and established his own workshop. His ideas and works, including *The Last Supper*, *Leda and the Swan*, and *Mona Lisa*, have influenced countless artists and made da Vinci a leading star of the Italian Renaissance. The *Mona Lisa* is da Vinci's most well-known painting and arguably the most famous painting in the world. This painting was forever a work in progress because it was Leonardo's attempt at perfection. He kept this painting with him until he died. Today, it hangs in the Louvre Museum in Paris, secured behind bulletproof glass and regarded as priceless national treasure. Da Vinci did not see a divide between science and art. His drawings included designs for flying machines, plant studies, war machinery, anatomy, and architecture. This famous artist died in Amboise, France on May 2, 1519.

Michelangelo was born on March 6, 1475 in Caprese, a village in Florentine territory. In 1488, he became an apprentice to Domenico Ghirlandaio for three years. His time here coincided with his beginning to work as a sculptor in the Medici Garden. Michelangelo produced two great sculptures by the time he was 16, *Battle of the Centaurs* and *Madonna of the Stairs*, which shows that he had achieved a personal style at a very early age. His first major work, the *Bacchus*, was carved in Rome. He returned to Florence in 1501 as a famous sculptor.

In 1508, back in Rome, he began his most important work, painting the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Michelangelo was not satisfied with the abilities of possible assistants, so he decided to execute this work alone. He worked under very difficult conditions, leaning backwards and never being able to get far enough away from the ceiling to see what he was doing. The entire ceiling represents life on earth before the law. He completed the entire ceiling in 1512, and it was immediately recognized as a supreme work of art. From then on, Michelangelo was universally regarded as the greatest living artist, although he was only 37 and many other great artists were around as well.

In 1546, Michelangelo was the Chief Architect to St. Peter's and was doing more there than had been done for thirty years. He completed all of his late works solely for the glory of God. Another one of his most famous works was the carving of the *Pieta*, which was originally intended for his own tomb. This is now found in the Florence Cathedral Museum. Michelangelo died at age 89 on February 18<sup>th</sup>, 1564.

Italian art is extremely interesting and still influential today.