European art of the 15th–17th centuries, associated with the Renaissance, a revival in learning that began in Florence, Italy, with the rise of a spirit of humanism and a new appreciation of the classical Greek and Roman past. Artists, who had previously been ranked as skilled craftsmen, were elevated for the first time to superior individuals, celebrated for their talent to create. Although the Church continued to have great influence on society, and remained a large patron of the arts, the growth in secular (non-religious) interests resulted in the increasing patronage of wealthy aristocrats, who wanted scenes inspired by classical antiquity. Artists perfected a visual language that held the human form in the highest esteem, following the example of classical art. Nature and human anatomy were studied in great detail by Renaissance artists, as were the rules governing perspective. Figures were painted with a sense of real weight and place, whereas previously they had seemed to ‘float’ against an unrealistic backdrop.

The 15th century is known as the Classical Renaissance; artists such as Masaccio, Filippo Brunelleschi, Donatello, and Sandro Botticelli led the Renaissance in Florence during this period, and Piero della Francesca and Andrea Mantegna elsewhere in Italy. The High Renaissance (early 16th century) covers the careers of Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael Sanzio, Michelangelo Buonarotti in Florence; Titian, Paolo Veronese, and Tintoretto in Venice; and Albrecht Dürer in Germany. Mannerism (around 1520–1600), a style that favoured exaggeration in figure and posture and distorted perspective, forms the final stage of the High Renaissance.

The Renaissance was heralded by the work of the early-14th–century painter Giotto in Florence, and in the early 15th century a handful of outstanding innovative artists emerged there, including Masaccio (in art), Donatello (in sculpture), and Brunelleschi (in architecture). At the same time the humanist philosopher, artist, and writer Leon Baptista Alberti recorded many of the new artistic theories in his treatises on painting, sculpture, and architecture. Concepts such as making the subject of painting the real world, with the illusion of a third dimension created by perspective, soon became widespread in Italy, and many new centres of patronage formed. The flat, religious paintings of medieval art, with gold backgrounds, primary colours, and unrealistic compositions, were no longer fashionable.

In Venice the painters Jacopo Bellini and Giorgione became leading Renaissance artists in the 15th century, and the city's tradition of artistic splendour continued during the High Renaissance with the work of Titian, Veronese, and Tintoretto and the influential architect Andrea Palladio. In the 16th century Rome became the chief centre of activity and innovation, and became the capital of the High Renaissance.

The creative achievements of Italian artists were fuelled throughout the Renaissance by the patronage of leading families such as the Sforza in Milan and the Medici in Florence; the ruling doge of Venice; and popes such as Julius II and Leo X.
In northern Europe the Renaissance spirit is apparent in the work of the Netherlandish painter Jan van Eyck in the early 15th century. Later, the German artist Dürer, who travelled widely in Europe and brought back many Renaissance ideas from Italy, became a leading figure of the northern Renaissance. The Italian artists Cellini, Rosso Fiorentino, and Primaticcio took the Renaissance to France through their work at Fontainebleau, influencing the development of the Fontainebleau School. Hans Holbein the Younger carried some of the concerns of Renaissance art to England in the 16th century, but it was not until the 17th century that English taste was significantly affected.