Matt Brent

Dr. Polina Kroik

HUMN 530

29 June 2025

Revised 10 May 2026

The Creativity of the Renaissance

The Italian Renaissance kicked off a period of unbridled creativity in Europe. What started as a rebirth of Greco-Roman culture soon flourished across Europe. After years of stagnation due to the fallout from the Black Death, the influx of trade into the northern Italian city-states brought forth so much wealth that the upper class used their wealth to become patrons of the arts. Because of the support of the Medicis, the Sforzas, and others, creators like Leonardo da Vinci were allowed the thrive, and this love for the arts spread throughout Europe allowing others, like Cervantes and Shakespeare, to make their own contributions. Overall, the Renaissance marked a boom in creativity that expanded the desire for the arts, allowing numerous creative visionaries to share their genius with generations to come.

While anyone can be creative, the ability to turn one's creativity into a product requires a bit more than simple desire. It needs the resources required to produce that product. If one is writing a play or novel, for example, one needs paper and ink. If one is trying to create a work of art, one needs canvas and paint, or in the case of a sculpture, a medium such as bronze or marble. Though these items are relatively available and affordable in the 21st century marketplace due to advancements in production and can easily be obtained through a click on the internet, acquiring them centuries ago would have required more effort and certainly more funds.

The wealth of local patrons was especially important to supporting the creativity of Renaissance artists. Federico Etro notes that, for painters specifically, the cost of the paints were "usually paid directly by the patrons" (p. 514). Access to a patron or patrons and the supplies they could provide is crucial to being able to exert one's creativity. This same concept applies to the present as well. Though I am fortunate to have a career with a decent salary that allows me to have disposable income, I do not necessarily want to spend my own income on resources for work. Finding a patron in the form of a grant is necessary to promote creativity. For example, a colleague and I designed a set of new literature classes with hoping to be able to offer them through virtual reality. We sought to secure grant funding through the National Endowment for the Humanities, and though we have been unsuccessful, we will keep trying.

The great thing about creativity is that it can earn one respect. As artists during the Renaissance grew in skill and attracted more patrons, their influence over their own art grew, while the patron's influence lessened. For example, Piano and Piano note that "the master painter retained exclusive control of all creative direction" (p. 316). In other words, an artist that had demonstrated his skill was worthy of being the decisionmaker. If an artist was not quite established, he would have to earn the respect of not only his fellow artists, but the patrons funding his art. Of course, if an artist is not yet established and is relying on the funding of others, he is at the whim of those patrons. Fortunately for us, however, there were patrons who supported all of the wonderful art from the period that we are able to see and study today.

Of all of the Renaissance artists, Leonardo da Vinci is the greatest. He was a true Renaissance man in that he was not just an artist, but also a scientist and inventor. His works

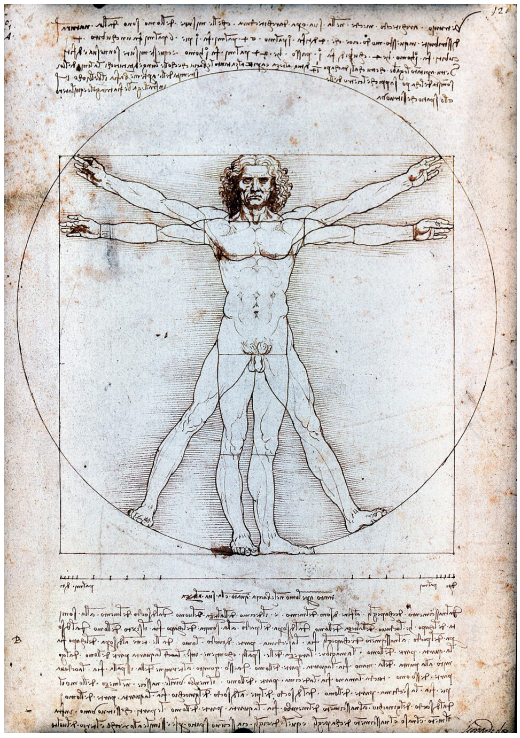

Fig. 1 Leonardo da Vinci. *Vitruvian Man* (1490)

certainly demonstrate the level of creativity occurring during the period. Leonardo da Vinci helped to transform the way individuals were portrayed in art. Rather than stick with the older, Medieval types of art that did not show much depth, Da Vinci studied the human form in an effort to refine his portrayals. His *Vitruvian Man* is a piece that demonstrates his commitment to creating phenomenal works of art by making his portrayals of people more realistic (Da Vinci, 1490). He is able to use that realistic imagery to further create wonderful pieces of art.

Da Vinci has a number of works that make him famous. Though mythological figures and scenes are prevalent throughout the Renaissance, Da Vinci's *The Last Supper* focuses on Christian themes (1498). His work features a depiction of the famous scene in which Jesus meets with his disciples over a meal. Though Da Vinci did not create the idea of this scene, he did take liberties with how he chose to present the scene. Giotto di Bondone, an artist that preceded Da Vinci by almost two hundred years, painted the scene as well. Giotto's painting, however, featured the individuals sitting around a table for dinner, much in the same way that a

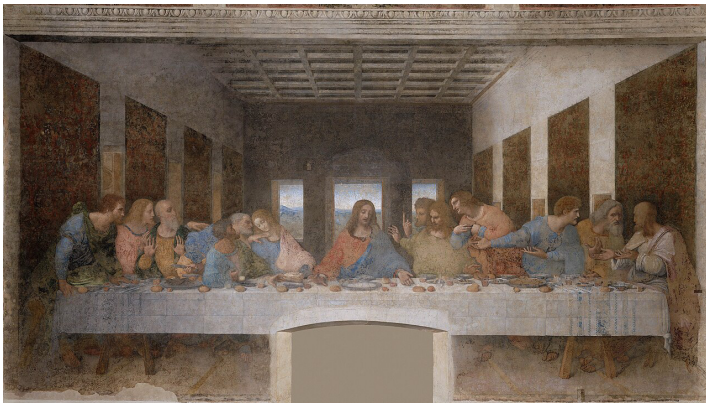

Fig. 2 Leonard da Vinci. *The Last Supper* (1498)

Fig. 3 Giotto di Bondone. *The Last Supper* (1306)

family would sit around a table today (1306). With Da Vinci's work, however, the individuals are seated behind a long table. Presenting the individuals in this way allows the viewer to get a clear image of each individual's face rather than the back of their heads as Giotto had done.

Leonardo da Vinci's creativity in his art has inspired numerous future artists. In addition, Da Vinci's portrayal of the meal with Jesus has left open a variety of interpretations about who each of the portrayed individuals actually is. Dan Brown, in his novel *The Da Vinci Code,* uses this discussion as the basis for an adventure for his protagonist, Robert Langdon. Brown himself used his own creativity when writing his novels, and using inspiration from Da Vinci's work is notable.

Leonardo da Vinci is far from the only Renaissance artist to address Christian themes in his work. His contemporary, Michelangelo Buonarroti, did so as well. Michelangelo's work on the Sistine Chapel Ceiling contains a variety of stories from the Bible. At the center of the ceiling is *The Creation of Adam* in which Michelangelo depicts the moment God sparks life into Adam (1512). Much like Da Vinci's works, Michelangelo portrayed Adam and God with great detail. Similarly, Michelangelo used great creativity when choosing how to present this scene. He could have simply painted Adam

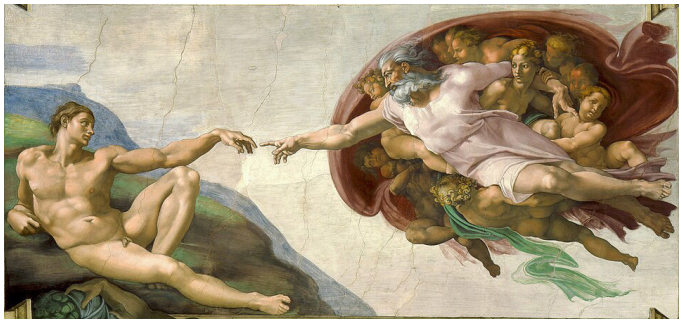

Fig. 4 Michelangelo. *The Creation of Adam* (1512)

and God, but he chose to place numerous figures behind God. In addition, he chose to clothe God, whereas Adam is naked in line with the creation story in Genesis. For such an important work, he was given great latitude to make decisions. Piano & Piano note that "Michelangelo refused to allow his patrons to observe him painting or even to check his frescos before completion" (p. 316). Each of these small bits of the work had to be decided, and Michelangelo's judgment reflected his creativity in how he wanted the scene portrayed. He was so well-respected his patrons allowed him to work without their input.

Fig. 5 Michelangelo. *David* (1504)

While I can appreciate Michelangelo's dedication to presenting Christian scenes atop the ceiling of the Sistine Chapter, it is his statue of David that truly amazes me. The *David* shows Michelangelo's skill at sculpture. The statue depicts an adult David (1504). In the statue one can observe the care and effort Michelangelo took to create a realistic depiction. The human form is perfect. David's musculature, hair, nipples, and other features are crafted remarkably. Michelangelo also chose to have David holding his sling across his shoulder as if he is ready to engage Goliath.

Like Da Vinci painting *The Last Supper* and making choices to change the scene so that it was different from previous versions like that of Giotto, Michelangelo made similar decisions when planning *David.* Several decades earlier, Donatello had created his own statue of David. Donatello chose bronze as his medium, and he opted to depict David as a young boy. Here David

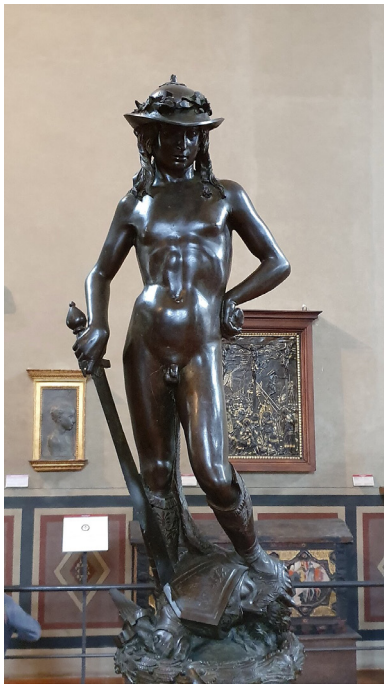

Fig. 6 Donatello. *David* (1440)

stands atop the severed head of Goliath, and the young boy holds the sword at his side (Donatello, 1440). This depiction, however, is more accurate to the actual story from 1 Samuel 17 than Michelangelo's depiction.

In choosing to show David as an adult, Michelangelo exercised his creative impulse, and in doing so, created a work of art that all can identify with. As adults we can aspire to be heroic like David. It may be more difficult for an adult to see a statue of a child and desire to be heroic long after their own childhood has passed. In addition, as Monica, et al, state "The David of Michelangelo immediately impressed as a masterpiece of extraordinary beauty; acknowledged as an example of perfection for the form of the naked body, and for the masterly interplay of apparent proportions among the different body segments" (p. 207). Though views in the 16th century were different, it would be difficult today to look at a nude statue of a child and think of it as perfection.

While Leonardo Da Vinci and Michelangelo Buonarotti created works involving scenes from Christianity, Sandro Botticelli seized upon the stories of the ancient Greeks and Romans. His focus on mythology and the Greco-Roman gods allowed him to exercise his creativity. Though he, too, created works that involved Christian themes, his mythological depictions are more interesting to me. Whereas Christian stories are often shared from their original scripture and thus remain relatively constant, mythological stories had the opportunity to change. Myths were originally passed around orally, and details could change with each retelling. As a result, choosing to paint a mythological scene gives the artist a great opportunity to truly be creative.

Two of Botticelli's more famous works involve the goddess, Venus. These are his *The Birth of Venus* and *Venus and Mars.* Though one myth claims that Venus is the child of Jupiter and Dione, the more common story is that she was born of the sea foam after Saturn castrated his father Uranus. It is this second story that Botticelli presents in his art. In his *Birth of Venus,* Botticelli paints the goddess standing on a seashell at the edge of the sea. She is greeted by another goddess who is ready to cover her naked body (Botticelli, 1485). Though the original story is somewhat vague, Botticelli took creative liberties with his portray of both the goddess and the event. He portrayed her as a full adult, despite being just born. He also opted to include additional characters in the scene. By including the various details in the painting, Botticelli makes it memorable rather than simply just having a naked woman on a shell. Nude characters in art were certainly nothing new.

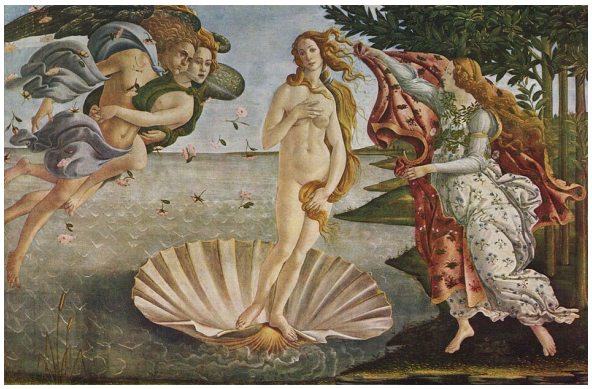

Fig. 7 Botticelli. *The Birth of Venus* (1485)

In his *Venus and Mars,* however, Botticelli does clothe Venus. In this work Venus and her brother, Mars, lie on the ground after having had sex. While Venus is completed covered, Mars only has a sheet draped over his genitals. There are also several satyrs in the scene (Botticelli, 1485). Once again Botticelli has the opportunity to share his creativity. This divine pair regularly got together in mythology, so he had the freedom to craft the scene however he

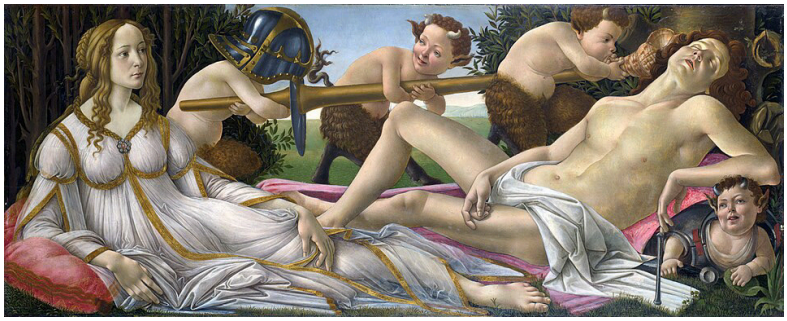

Fig. 8 Botticelli. *Venus & Mars* (1485)

chose. Like the *Birth of Venus* Botticelli included additional characters. The satyrs that are present add to the fun of the scene, as they are mischievous creatures. They are stealing Mars' armor and weapons as Venus watches. The satyrs aren't required by the scene at all but including them shows a level of decision-making by Botticelli in which he is showing the lighthearted side of the union of the two deities.

The art of the Italian Renaissance was incredible. The efforts of the various artists showed Europe and the world beyond that creativity can thrive and create a better world. As these ideals spread north, individuals began exercising creativity in other forms. Men like William Shakespeare put pen and ink to paper to create whole stories that could be presented on stage and allowing viewers to imagine themselves witnessing events unfold firsthand.

Like the painters and sculptors before him, Shakespeare utilized pre-existing stories for his work. His histories, like *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar*, use real events as the basis for his plays. Like Da Vinci interpreting *The Last Supper*, Shakespeare interprets these historical events and formats them for portrayal on stage. Shakespeare also used his works to present original stories to his audiences, like *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet* and *The Tempest.* Both plays contain important messages for his audience. *Romeo and Juliet* warns of the dangers of conflict while *The Tempest* teaches of the power of forgiveness.

Shakespeare's *The Tempest,* though not explicitly covered in this course, is a fun read. I had the opportunity to study it in a graduate course I took on Shakespeare, and I have taught the play in a British Literature class at a prison. The use of magic in the story touches on the fantasy genre, which, in a way, puts Shakespeare ahead of his time. The fact that he uses magical characters in his plays, like Prospero in *The Tempest* or the witches in *MacBeth,* demonstrates his creativity. In discussing *The Tempest,* Steven Petersheim notes that "In Ferdinand, Shakespeare

presents an alternative to traditional models of aristocratic masculinity codified in Baldassare Castiglione's *Il libro del cortegiano* (1528)... one that draws upon but extends beyond Castiglione's ideals" (p. 77). Here Shakespeare's creativity allows him to see traditional positions, roles, and responsibilities in a new light. He can take a serious concept and make it seem personable.

Shakespeare continues his lessons in his *A Midsummer Night's Dream.* In this play he engages with multiple storylines that converge. He has fairies interacting with the human world. He has Robin Goodfellow, a mischievous fairy, given a human named Bottom the head of a donkey and makes the fairy queen, Titania, fall in love with him. The whole scenario is reminiscent of a modern-day sitcom. While I am far from a playwright, I admire Shakespeare's ability to generate new and engaging stories. Through his works the viewers can learn a variety of lessons. For example, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* we can see that things are not always what they seem. Similarly, in both *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest,* we can see that people have the ability to change.

Shakespeare is still taught in classrooms across the world today because there are still lessons we can learn from his work. Furthermore, we can also observe that, through the study of his own creativity, we can be creative ourselves. James Harmer, in his text *Renaissance Literature and Linguistic Creativity,* discusses various Renaissance writers including Shakespeare. He notes of the writers:

> "They have a voice whose tone is vital—one that speaks out, in need. These writers each develop a version of a self-critical, self-conscious first-person voice that blends a fearful doubt about the raw, almost unthinkable freedom of creative thought with a hope and

> belief in the need to construct an understanding of the sources and nature of linguistic creativity." (p. 7)

Not only did Shakespeare get creative with his stories, he used various words and phrases to refer to people and events. He demonstrated to others that they, too, could do the same thing and allow their own creativity to flourish.

As a youth I found myself to be pretty creative. I enjoyed writing short stories and playing games. With the passage of time into my teenage years, and certainly into adulthood, I lost a bit of my creativity. Upon reflection, I don't think the ability was lost. Rather, it was the desire. I no longer had a need to be creative given that my job was very factual and, to an extent, data driven. While I could be creative at times in developing lesson plans or activities, those still centered around my career. The idea of creativity for fun had been lost.

The individuals covered in this course certainly espoused creativity. Whether those individuals were putting paint to brush, chisel to marble, or pen to paper, they were churning out phenomenal works as a result of their own creativity. If anything, it makes me realize that these adults centuries ago were doing something that I could be doing today. While I may be a great artist, I have the capacity to be creative, and that creative nature should be embraced.

Works Cited

Botticelli, Sandro. *The Birth of Venus.* 1485.

Botticelli, Sandro. *Venus and Mars.* 1485.

Da Vinci, Leonardo. *The Last Supper.* 1498.

Da Vinci, Leonardo. *Vitruvian Man.* 1490.

Donatello. *David.* 1440.

Etro, Federico. "The Economics of Renaissance Art." *The Journal of Economic History*, vol. 78, no. 2, 2018, pp. 500–38. *JSTOR*, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26787116. Accessed 29 June 2025.

Giotto. *Last Supper.* 1306.

Harmer, James. *Renaissance Literature and Linguistic Creativity*. 1st ed., Routledge, 2016, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315605289.

Michelangelo. *The Creation of Adam.* 1512.

Michelangelo. *David.* 1504.

Monica, Matteo Della, et al. "Michelangelo's David: Triumph of Perfection or Perfect Combination of Variation and Disproportions? A Human Perspective." *Italian Journal of Anatomy and Embryology*, vol. 124, no. 2, 2019, pp. 201–11, https://doi.org/10.13128/ijae-10782.

Petersheim, Steven. "'As I Am a Man': Shakespeare's Ferdinand as Renaissance Man in Training." *Explorations in Renaissance Culture*, vol. 38, no. 1–2, 2012, pp. 77–94, https://doi.org/10.1163/23526963-90000427.

Piano, Ennio E., and Clara E. Piano. “Contracting Creativity: Patronage and Creative Freedom in the Italian Renaissance Art Market.” *European Review of Economic History*, vol. 27, no. 3, 2023, pp. 311–35, https://doi.org/10.1093/ereh/heac021.