**Gothic Painting (1280-1515)**

The Gothic style began with the architecture of the 12th century, at the height of the Middle Ages, when Europe was putting the memory of the ``Dark Ages'' behind it and moving into a radiant new era of prosperity and confidence. At the same time, Christianity was entering a new and triumphant phase of its history, and so the age of chivalry was also the time of the building of the magnificent Gothic cathedrals, such as those in the northern French towns of Chartres, Reims and Amiens. In the realm of painting, the change to the new style became visible around a century after the first of these cathedrals rose. In contrast to the Romanesque and Byzantine styles, the most noticeable feature of the art of the Gothic period is its increased naturalism. This quality, which first appeared in the work of Italian artists in the late 13th century, became the dominant painting style throughout Europe until the end of the 15th century.

The Gothic era in painting spanned more than 200 years, starting in Italy and spreading to the rest of E.

By the end of the 14th century, the fusion of Italian and Northern European art had led to the development of an International Gothic style. For the next quarter of a century, leading artists travelled from Italy to France, and vice versa, and all over Europe. As a consequence, ideas spread and merged, until eventually painters in this International Gothic style could be found in France, Italy, England, Germany, Austria and Bohemia.

**Masters of illumination**

The ancient art of book illumination was still the prevailing form of painting in France at the beginning of the 15th century. It reached new heights, however, in the work of the three Limbourg brothers, Pol, Herman, and Jean, exponents of the International Gothic style.

They came from Gelderland, a province of the Netherlands, but worked in France. They were the only other Gothic painters to take such orderly joy as that shown by Ambrogio Lorenzetti in the city and its environment, its people, and its rulers. The Limbourg brothers all died suddenly in 1416, probably of the plague.

The Limbourgs' joint masterpiece, Les Très Riches Heures, was commissioned by the wealthy and extravagant manuscript collector, the Duc de Berry. Les Très Riches Heures is one of a genre of 15th-century illustrated prayer books known as ``book of hours''. The ``hours'' were prayers to be said at one of seven hours of the day. A book of hours would naturally contain a calendar, and this became the opportunity for a display of the illuminator's talent. Sadly, this particular example was unfinished at the time of the Limbourgs' and the Duc de Berry's deaths.

Each month is marked by an enchanting scene, usually showing appropriate seasonal activities. In August, we see courtly lovers riding to hunt with their falcons, while the great white ducal castle gleams in the distance and the peasant swim happily in the winding stream. The blue upper part of the painting shows an astrological hemisphere. With its mixture of courtly refinement and everyday reality, this miniature is representative of many in the book.

The Garden of Eden was painted separately from the rest of Les Très Riches Heures and inserted into it later. It is a great enclosed circle showing the world as it was intended to remain before Adam and Eve's fall from grace. The whole story of the loss of Eden and human self-will is set graphically before us. Adam and Eve are finally ejected from the lush greenery of Eden unto a dangerous rocky shore. The Limbourgs' consciousness of tragedy is no less acute for being so chivalric in its manner. For all their elegance, they are as aware as all great artists that pain is our human lot.

In the 15th century, the International Gothic style developed in two directions: both could be called revolutions. One was in the South, in Florence, and was the birth of the Italian Renaissance. The other tool place in the North, in the Low Countries, where painting went through an independent but equally radical transformation: this was the beginning of the Northern Renaissance movement.