

Italian
Renaissance
Learning
Resources

In collaboration with
the National Gallery of Art



1. The Medal:

The Renaissance “Calling Card”

The medal was an important part of the Renaissance visual vocabulary. It allowed for one’s sense of self to be presented in a small format for distribution to friends and people in positions of power. Rulers, intellectuals, wealthy merchants, married women, and widows are all known to have commissioned medals. This activity looks at a variety of Renaissance men and women in different levels of society and the kinds of medals they may have ordered for themselves.

PURPOSE: to prompt students to consider which qualities Renaissance men and women wanted to project in images of themselves, and why; to prompt students to think about how such characteristics can be communicated by symbolic means,

MATERIALS: images of the medals presented in this unit ([see unit images](#))

(Optionally, you can also consider modern commemorative medals, which can be seen at the websites listed under Resources, below.)

PROCEDURE: After viewing and discussing images of various medals in class, divide the class into small groups, with each group given the assignment to design a medal. Have each group choose a Renaissance individual, either real or imagined, whom they have studied, read about, or discussed in this unit. Encourage the groups to commemorate a range of individuals including, for example:

- A powerful aristocratic and autocratic ruler in control of a territory
- A scholar whose favorite occupation is reading but who is also engaged in finding and transcribing ancient texts
- A lady-in-waiting to Isabella d’Este, a kind of social secretary and personal assistant who helps Isabella with her clothes, reads to her at night, and keeps a list of her personal and political contacts
- A wealthy merchant in a city such as Florence who is influential and powerful but not an autocratic ruler

1. The Medal:

INTERMEDIATE / ADVANCED

The Renaissance “Calling Card” (Continued)

First, students should write a short biography of the person for whom their medal is being proposed. Then they should plan the design of their medals, including these elements:

1) The front, or obverse, of the medal should present a portrait. It should also include an inscription relating to the individual being honored. Students should list some of the important details about the person who is seen in the portrait.

2) The design of the back, or verso, should include one or more symbols or figures that convey specific ideas about the individual in allegorical terms. Students should describe each component and specify the reason it was chosen.

GLOSSARY: medal, allegory, symbol, Isabella d’Este, Leon Battista Alberti, Cosimo I de’ Medici, Poggio Bracciolini, Federigo II da Montefeltro

RESOURCES:

“**Medals.**” United States Mint. [images of modern commemorative medals issued by the U.S. Mint]

“**H.I.P.: Pocket Change: Commemorative Coins.**” United States Mint. [information and activities for kids]

2. A Room of One's Own: *A Studiolo* for Modern Times

This activity asks students to consider the Renaissance *studiolo*. It was a room designed for contemplation and study, but it was also a space meant to project an image of learning, customized for a specific individual.

PURPOSE: to prompt students to think about the interests and ideals of Renaissance persons and how these interests and ideals were communicated through art collections.

MATERIALS: images of Giovanni Bellini's *Feast of the Gods* (see **[fig. 1]** and **interactive [fig. 2]**) and the *studiolo* of Federigo da Montefeltro **[fig. 3]**.

PROCEDURE: First, discuss the studioli of Alfonso d'Este and Federigo da Montefeltro. Then, ask students to think about how one would design a studiolo for use today. What would a space with carefully chosen objects for contemplation and study look like? How would it reflect the interests and personality of a contemporary individual, either real or imagined? Would the objects include paintings, sculptures, and drawings, as in the Renaissance?

This project can be structured in various ways, with students working either as a single unit, in small groups, or alone. Students should describe as fully as possible the patron for whom their studiolo is intended and the particular themes that are emphasized within it. Depending on the time available, the project could result in drawings and plans, or perhaps even a model; specifications as to individual components such as intarsia; and plans made to show the arrangement of objects. Students should list the objects or prepare small drawings or photographs of them.

2. A Room of One's Own: *A Studiolo* for Modern Times (Continued)

ADVANCED

GLOSSARY: studiolo, Alfonso I d'Este,
Federigo II da Montefeltro

RESOURCES:

“Studiolo from the Ducal Palace in Gubbio.”
Met Media. Metropolitan Museum of Art.
<http://www.metmuseum.org/metmedia/interactives/adults-teachers/studiolo-from-the-ducal-palace-in-gubbio> [a web feature on the reconstructed *studiolo* of Federigo da Montefeltro]

“Investigating Bellini’s Feast of the Gods.”
WebExhibits. Institute for Dynamic
Educational Advancement (IDEA). <http://www.webexhibits.org/feast/> [a web feature about *Feast of the Gods* and the *studiolo* of Alfonso d’Este]

Ovid. *Fasti*. Translation by Anne and Peter
Wiseman. Oxford: Oxford University Press,
2013. [the text on which *Feast of the Gods*
is based]

2. A Room of One's Own: A Studiolo for Modern Times

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Fig. 1 Giovanni Bellini and Titian

The Feast of the Gods, 1514/29

Oil on canvas, 170.2 x 188 cm (67 x 74 in.)

National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, Widener Collection

Image courtesy of the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art



Fig. 2 Key to the antique gods depicted in Giovanni Bellini's Feast of the Gods

From John Walker, *Bellini and Titian at Ferrara: A Study of Tastes and Styles*

(London: Phaidon, 1956), p.16

2. A Room of One's Own: A Studiolo for Modern Times

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Fig. 3 Designed by Federigo da Montefeltro,
executed in the workshop of Giuliano da Maiano *Studiolo* from the Ducal Palace in Gubbio, c. 1478–82
Walnut, beech, rosewood, oak, and fruitwoods in walnut base, 485 x 518 x 384 cm (
190 15/16 x 203 15/16 x 151 3/16 in.)
Installed at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY

3. Intellectual for Hire: Constructing a Web Site

INTERMEDIATE

Renaissance intellectuals, who typically acquired knowledge in many subject areas and mastered a number of skills, worked for a wide range of patrons and advised on a diverse set of projects, from commemorative poems to thematic programs for visual artists to the design of city defenses.

GLOSSARY: **humanism**

PURPOSE: to prompt students to understand the enthusiasm for and wide range of new types of knowledge among the Renaissance elite.

PROCEDURE: Ask the class as a unit to enumerate the kinds of skills that the Renaissance intellectual had at his or her disposal. Then have the students consider who might be in the market for such skills (see the list of types of Renaissance patrons in *The Medal: The Renaissance “Calling Card”*). Finally, have students construct a website in which the scholar presents those skills to potential clients. Alternately, students could create a fictive Facebook page for the humanist.

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