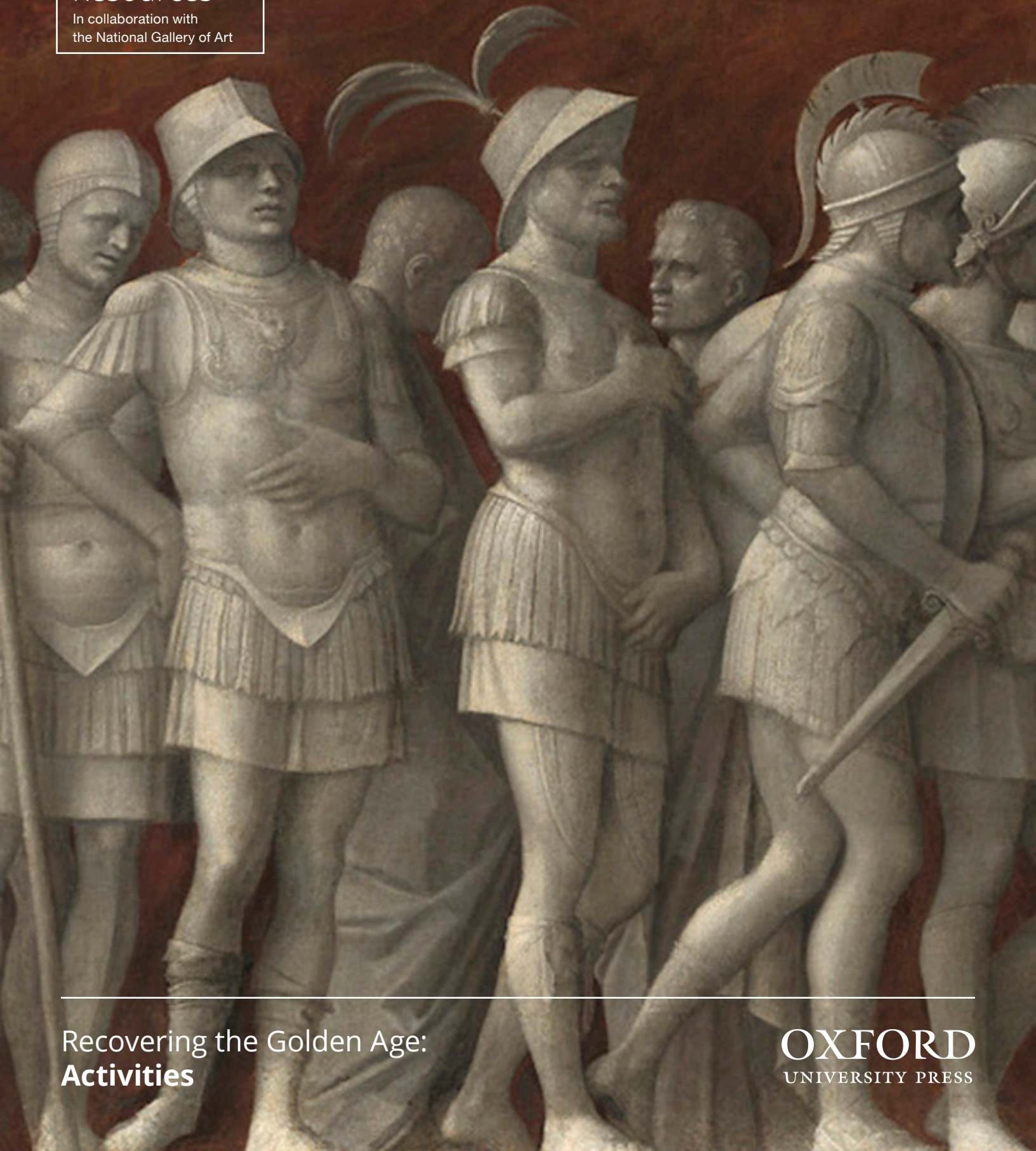


Italian
Renaissance
Learning
Resources

In collaboration with
the National Gallery of Art



Recovering the Golden Age:
Activities

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1. Investigating the Canon of Proportions Part 1

Through observation and measurement, students will work with the system of ideal ratios found in the writings of Leonardo da Vinci to compare nature with art.

PURPOSE: to learn about the proportions of the human body, both real (as observed in life) and ideal (as observed in Renaissance art).

MATERIALS: rulers, large sheet of paper or board, photocopies of the painting Saint Sebastian attributed to Gian Francesco de' Maineri **[fig. 1]**

PROCEDURE:

1. Distribute the rulers and photocopies. Explain that many Renaissance artists were interested in rediscovering the classical canon of proportions—the system of mathematical ratios used by the ancient Greeks to produce an ideally beautiful version of the human body. Each segment of the body was adapted to a fixed numeric ratio intended to bring it into perfect proportion to other segments and to the body as a whole. Drawing on hints gleaned from the writings of Roman authors such as Vitruvius, Renaissance artists experimented with these ratios in their own idealized depictions of the human body.

2. Ask students to measure the figure represented in Saint Sebastian to observe how the canon of proportions influenced the artist's representation of the body. Working with ruler and photocopy, ask students to begin by measuring the head (from the crown just below the crest of the hair to the bottom of the chin). Using a pencil, they should then mark off this unit of measurement all the way down the body, from the chin to the heel. Ask what they notice about the measurements. You might prompt them with the following questions:

- What is the ratio of the head to the whole body? *Eight*
- Does the ratio determine the size or placement of any other body parts? Hint: where do the pencil lines intersect the body? *The ratio applies to seven other equal segments: chin to nipple; nipple to navel; navel to groin; groin to mid-thigh; mid-thigh to knee; knee to mid-shin; mid-shin to ankle.*

1. Investigating the Canon of Proportions **Part 1** (Continued)

3. Ask students use Saint Sebastian to test some of the other ratios from the ideal canon of human proportions, as formulated by the Renaissance artist Leonardo da Vinci (based on his reading of Vitruvius):

- distance from the middle of the chest to the top of the head = $\frac{1}{4}$ of total height
- maximum width of the shoulders = $\frac{1}{4}$ of total height
- distance from the middle of the chest to the top of the head = $\frac{1}{4}$ of total height
- distance from the elbow to the armpit = $\frac{1}{8}$ of total height

4. Emphasize that the canon is not based on real bodies, but on ideal geometric relationships. To demonstrate the artificiality of the canon, ask students to take the following basic measurements of their own bodies (working in small groups or pairs):

- a. total height
- b. head (crown to chin)
- c. width of shoulders (at widest point)
- d. distance from elbow to armpit

After determining the measurements, have each group calculate the relationship of b, c, and d to a, and express the three ratios as fractions.

1. Investigating the Canon of Proportions **Part 1** (Continued)

5. Record the ratios from the students' bodies in three columns on a large sheet of paper or board. Then write the ideal ratios from the canon of proportions above the appropriate column ($a/b=1/8$, $a/c=1/4$, $a/d=1/8$).

Lead a discussion:

- How do your results compare with the canon of proportions?

Results should vary widely; some ratios will be greater, some smaller.

- What conclusions can you draw about the relationship of the canon to actual human bodies?

The ideal ratios of the canon are rarely found in reality.

- Why might classical and Renaissance artists have chosen to represent people according to mathematical formulas (idealism) instead of actual appearances (realism)?

Responses may include: a desire to please the eye through order, symmetry, harmony; a belief that art should improve on nature; as a method of representing a perfected world (for example, when depicting classical gods or Christian religious subjects) as opposed to the real world

- What does art gain from idealism?

Beauty, uniformity.

- What does it gain from naturalism and realism?

Variety, verisimilitude.

1. Investigating the Canon of Proportions Part 1
Image Reference



Fig. 1 Attributed to Gian Francesco de' Maineri
Saint Sebastian, c. 1500
Oil on wood panel, 33.7 x 22.2 cm (13 5/16 x 8 3/4 in.)
Memphis Brooks Museum of Art, Memphis, Gift of the Samuel H. Kress Collection

1. Investigating the Canon of Proportions **Part 2**

Through observation and measurement, students will work with the system of ideal ratios found in the writings of Leonardo da Vinci to compare nature with art.

PURPOSE: to consider how ideal proportions of the human body have shifted over time.

MATERIALS: figural works of art in a museum; magazines, books, or internet access

PROCEDURE:

1. Note that ideals of the human body vary over time, in much the same way that clothing and fashion vary over time. Challenge students to locate alternative ideals of the body from diverse periods of history and geographic locations. They can do this either on a class trip to an art museum or by reviewing images in magazines, books, or online.

2. Ask students to extrapolate the canons of proportion that generated these body types by estimating some standard ratios, such as the measurement of the head relative to the total height.

3. Use the results as the basis of a discussion.

- What similarities and differences emerge from comparing the ideal bodies of one time and place with those of another?
- What conclusions can you draw about the idealism of bodily beauty in human culture?

2. Analyzing and Writing Renaissance Sonnets Part 1

PURPOSE: to learn about the Italian sonnet form and interpret a sonnet by Petrarch.

MATERIALS: writing materials, [handout with sonnet 307 by Petrarch](#), [worksheet](#)

If a classroom discussion will be part of the activity, the sonnet should be written out on a large sheet of paper or board.

Optional: Select an alternative Petrarchan sonnet from the title listed in Resources, below.

PROCEDURE:

1. Instructor should review information on [Petrarch](#) and the English translation of Petrarch's sonnet, as well as the worksheet questions ([see instructor's copy](#)). Instructors may wish to begin the activity by sharing basic information about the sonnet (perhaps likening its fourteen-line brevity to a 140-character tweet) and on Petrarch. For example, Petrarch developed and popularized the Italian sonnet form in hundreds of poems, many of which concern his unrequited love for his muse, Laura. His poetry inspired many fifteenth-century painters.

2. Distribute worksheets and conduct the activity "Analyze a Sonnet," either as a class (with the instructor guiding students through the worksheet and annotating the large version of sonnet 307) or by asking students to complete the worksheet in groups or individually. If the latter option is chosen, review the students' findings in a class discussion.

GLOSSARY: [Petrarch](#)

RESOURCES:

Fifteen Sonnets of Petrarch. Selected and translated by Thomas Wentworth Higginson. Boston: Houghton Mifflin & Co., 1903. Available at the [Online Library of Liberty](#).

2. Analyzing and Writing Renaissance Sonnets Part 2

PURPOSE: to analyze a fifteenth-century work of art and brainstorm ideas for recreating it in sonnet form.

MATERIALS: writing materials, an original work of fifteenth-century art (if conducting activity in art gallery) or a reproduction (if conducting activity in classroom), worksheet (for reference)

If students carry out this activity in an art gallery, choose a fifteenth-century work of art that lends itself to narrative exposition. If students carry out the activity in the classroom or at home, you may wish to focus on one of the following paintings: *The Triumph of Camillus* by Biagio d'Antonio and workshop [fig. 2]; *The Triumph of Caesar* by Jacopo Palma il Vecchio [fig. 3]; *The Meeting of Dido and Aeneas* by the studio of Francesco di Giorgio Martini [fig. 4]

PROCEDURE:

1. Lead the class in analyzing the work of art. What event is depicted? Who are the main characters? What are they doing? What might happen next? What is the mood of the scene? What broader themes are suggested? Ask students to provide specific visual evidence in support of their answers.

2. Once a basic understanding of the work of art has been established, ask students to consider how a poet might treat the same subject in a sonnet. What problem, question, or emotional tension would be laid out in the initial eight-line octavo? How could this be resolved in the final six-line sestet? What words might be needed to express the subject? Can they provide the basis for a rhyme scheme?

2. Analyzing and Writing Renaissance Sonnets Part 2 Image Reference



Fig. 2 Biagio d'Antonio and workshop
The Triumph of Camillus, c. 1470/75
Tempera on panel, 60 x 154.3 cm
(23 5/8 x 60 3/4 in.)
National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC,
Samuel H. Kress Collection
Image courtesy of the Board of Trustees,
National Gallery of Art



Fig. 3 Palma Vecchio
The Triumph of Caesar, c. 1510
Oil on wood, 69.5 x 145.7 cm (27 3/8 x 57 3/8 in.)
Lowe Art Museum, University of Miami,
Gift of the Samuel H. Kress Collection



Fig. 4 Studio of Francesco di Giorgio Martini
The Meeting of Dido and Aeneas, c. 1480
Tempera on wood, 37.5 x 110.2 cm
(14 13/16 x 43 7/16 in.)
Portland Art Museum,
Gift of the Samuel H. Kress Foundation

2. Analyzing and Writing Renaissance Sonnets Part 3

PURPOSE: to write an original sonnet inspired by a fifteenth-century work of art.

MATERIALS: writing materials, worksheet (for reference), image of the fifteenth-century work of art used in Part 2

PROCEDURE:

Students should complete Part 1 and 2. As a homework assignment, ask students to write their own sonnet inspired by a fifteenth-century work of art. Possible options include:

- a response to the poem analyzed in Part 1
- a verbal exposition of the work of art analyzed in Part 2
- a sonnet inspired by another Renaissance work of the student's choosing
- a meditation on the experience of studying artifacts from the fifteenth century

3. Ancient Artifacts: Trash or Treasure? Part 1

PURPOSE: to research and defend in a classroom debate three contrasting attitudes toward classical antiquities in fifteenth-century Italy.

MATERIALS: handout, writing materials, access to library or online resources supporting research on the history of Renaissance art and architecture

PROCEDURE:

1. Distribute handout to each student. Divide the class into small groups and assign each group one of the three Renaissance personae described in the activity sheet. Explain that the members of each group will work together to research their assigned character in preparation for defending that character's claim to a recently discovered antique statue. Encourage them to support their argument with visual aids, such as photocopies of buildings or art objects, charts or tables, and so forth.

2. When the research is completed, stage a mock debate. The instructor (playing the role of the wealthy landowner) will ask one of the groups to provide a single reason why the fifteenth-century character they represent should be allowed to purchase the statue. The instructor will then ask other groups if they have anything to add—either in support (if they represent the same character) or in rebuttal (if they represent one of the other two characters). The instructor will call on the various groups in succession, trying to alternate the personae and giving every group a chance to speak. Adhering to the “one reason” rule during each turn will help ensure that everyone has a chance to contribute something new to the debate.

3. After the debate, ask the students to set their assumed identities aside and objectively consider each of the three positions. Would they actually favor a position other than the one they were assigned to defend? Why? How does twenty-first-century hindsight influence their opinion? Can they think of modern-day debates or personal experiences that have raised similar issues?

3. Ancient Artifacts: Trash or Treasure? Part 2

PURPOSE: to research and defend in a written essay three contrasting attitudes toward classical antiquities in fifteenth-century Italy.

MATERIALS: handout, writing materials, access to library or online resources supporting research on the history of Renaissance art and architecture

PROCEDURE:

Ask students to again adopt the persona of one of the three fifteenth-century characters described in the activity sheet (not necessarily the one they were assigned to research) and work together to write a persuasive letter to the wealthy landowner, arguing their case for purchasing the statue. The letter should be approximately 500 words in length and make use of historical information as supporting evidence.

Alternately, the students may carry out the activity may be individually, rather than in groups. In this case, ask each student to research and write arguments for all three personae, either as a series of three monologues, a conversational debate, or letters written to the landowner.