Children of the Renaissance: A Guide for Educators

When we teach children about the Florentine Renaissance, where do we begin? Should we begin with the most famous, recognizable pieces of art, like Michelangelo’s “David”? Boticelli’s Venus? The great sparkling Duomo? It’s tempting to throw all of the masterpieces at youth at once, plunging them headlong into visual magnificence. However, a more successful lesson plan would organize artwork around a theme, and choose a theme that children will find compelling. So the question is…What do children care about?

Children care about other children, of course. Although the lives and accomplishments of children are rarely considered important enough to make history books, the Renaissance is a time when children’s lives were unusually well-documented. We know a lot about Michelangelo’s childhood, but we also know a lot about children who never became famous as adults—children from impoverished families who were abandoned at birth, and grew up in hospitals. In Florence, the Hospital of the Innocents Museum contains hundreds of archival records and ephemera, and through these materials we can recreate most aspects of orphan’s lives, from the food they ate, to the clothes they wore, to their educations.

This essay aims to introduce educators to some of the materials available about children’s lives in the Renaissance. It will include some suggestions about how to approach the subject in
the classroom, and offer some research questions that students can investigate in the library.

Some questions to begin:

- How did children benefit from the artistic and cultural flowering of their city?
- How did adults treat children during the Renaissance?
- How were children portrayed in works of Renaissance art?
- What was the child culture of Florence during the Renaissance?

The artwork and historical material in this course should be broadly appealing to all, but these materials are meant to be adapted to be appropriate for different age groups.

**Overview:** During Medieval Ages, Italians didn’t value the concept of “childhood,” or consider that children needed educations. However, during the height of the Florentine Renaissance, Italian society began for the first time to consider children as full human beings whose well-being and education should be carefully considered (Maggi 7). This societal change can be attributed, in large part, to the Medici family, the ruling family of bankers who gave Florence the gifts of art, culture, and humanism.

The Medieval era was viewed as religiously repressive, but the Renaissance was a creative, expressive time, one in which Michelangelo’s boldly sensual “David” was considered a symbol of the city. Humanists believed in valuing the human body and its pleasures. They also gave the culture a new appreciation for food, drink, and physical comfort. This new awareness of nutrition and health improved children’s lives immensely—especially poor children and orphans, who now had the chance to receive educations, learn trades, and be well cared for in hospitals and orphanages. Indeed, “Florence was at the vanguard of child culture (Maggi 7). Florentine humanism believed in embracing individuality and creativity. Lorenzo Medici, who was
credited as being a leader in the humanist movement, discovered young Michelangelo when he was a boy of fourteen. Lorenzo adopted and nurtured this young artist, and many, many more. Lorenzo’s apprentices then grew up to train other young apprentices, and thus, the city of Florence was populated with more artists and masterpieces than any other city in the world.

If the Medici hadn’t recognized, and embraced, children’s potential, we might not have had an Italian Renaissance at all. One shudders to think what would have become of Western art if the city of Florence hadn’t cared so deeply about their children. The first object of study in the classroom could be the Duomo (see below). Why the Duomo? First, there are two interesting pieces of art featuring children inside of the Duomo, and students need to see the exterior in order to appreciate the context and meaning of the gems within.

Figure 1 The Duomo, from Blue Guide Florence
Second, the Duomo is a symbol of Florence, “holding sway over the whole city.” (Macadam, 37). Since the theme of these course materials is children’s contribution to the city of Florence, it’s important for students to have a mental image of Florence as a city, and be able to conjure up its buildings and vistas throughout the entire course. The first essential aspect of the Duomo’s history was that it took over 140 years to be completed. This should interest children, who may have trouble fathoming that people would devote so much time to a project that wouldn’t be completed in their lifetimes. In fact, the church has roots as far back as the 6th or 7th century, and then was “reconstructed several times in the Romanesque period.” Pieces of this early church remain, including the Bishop’s Seat and others. (MacAdams, 38). Children will be fascinated by the idea that architects literally build on top of previous architect’s work, using pieces of the past to create something new. A teacher might make this concept tangible by showing a photograph of the city in which the students live. Are there examples where contemporary architects have built around, or on top of, historic elements? Are there still cobblestones from the days of horse and carriage, despite the fact that cars are on the road today? Students of all ages can appreciate the concept of the layering of old and new.

When conveying to students the length of time it took to complete the Duomo, teachers might also want to discuss the city’s emotional journey, from hope to despair and back to hope again. When the Duomo was begun in the 1300s, it was “an expression of the wealth and optimism of Florence at this period. But it risked overshooting in its optimism…The architects had left themselves with a seemingly insoluble problem: the octagonal drum on which the final dome was to be placed was just over 43 meters in diameter—a distance too great to construct a wooden jig, or ‘centring.’…To Florence’s humiliation…work on Duomo stopped, and the building had no dome.” (McGilchrist, 13).
For very young children, a teacher might make a model of a domeless Duomo, and say, “Look how sad the Duomo looks without a dome!” This kind of personification could add to the liveliness of the story—a story that has a happy ending. Luckily, the Renaissance era brought exactly the right combination of scientific and artistic skills, and “a radically new and different way of thinking,” that could solve the past generation’s problems figuring out the Duomo construction. (McGilchrist, 13). Fillipo Brunelleschi was the engineer and creator of the dome.

Research Questions for Students.

• Who was Fillipo Brunelleschi?
• What engineering methods and artistic skills did Brunelleschi use when constructing the dome? How were his construction methods superior to those of the architects who came before him?
• Research the three colors of marble on the exterior of the Duomo. Why did the Duomo use marble from three Italian cities—white from Carrera, green from Prato, and red from the Maremma? (Macadam, 36). What do these colors signify? Are they typical colors of the time? (Note that the following questions explore engineering and science as well as art. Library curriculum is often interdisciplinary, and it’s meaningful when students interested in science can pursue the scientific aspects of visual art)

Most importantly, teachers should convey that the completion of the Duomo was a wildly joyous time for the city of Florence. At long last, there was a dome on the sad church that had gone without a dome for so many decades. At long last, the city of Florence was complete! To celebrate such an enormous accomplishment, the city decided to build two Cantoria, or singing lofts, adored with reliefs of children. Children represented the hope, promise and flowering of the city Florence—the very essence of the city itself. (Museum Tour, The Opera Del Duomo Museum, May 25, 2008). These lofts, built by Luca Della Robbia and Donatello (Donato di Niccolò di Beto Bardi Donatello) depict two kinds of children: wild and tame, in a matter of speaking. When examining these choir lofts, teachers might enjoy asking their students to discuss what it means to be well-behaved or rambunctious: Which choir loft depicts a “realistic” child? Which group of children is having more fun?
After the children point to the more realistic children—the rambunctious, imperfect children—the teacher can point out the irony that these children are not actually children at all, but putti, fantasy creatures. The children who look too perfect (Della Robbia’s) are supposed to be naturalistic children. So what is real and what is illusion? What does it mean to idealize?

Della Robbia’s Cantoria illustrates the scriptural text that urges the beholder to “Praise Him” through song and dance. So the teacher might tell students that the dancing and singing here is meant to be pious, and that this might affect the mood of the children. When studying this work of art, the teacher may ask students to identify the material (marble), and discuss what aspects of the children seem naturalistic or not. Do their faces look real? Do they have individual personalities? What kind of dancing are they doing? Do they seem like good dancers or not? How does the artist seem to feel about children? Would the students guess that the artist knows a lot of children well in his own life, and has insights into what it feels like to be a child? Della
Robbia wanted this choir loft to show dancers and musicians who were “rhythmical.” (Mitrano, 50). What kind of music do students think is being played in this scene? Slow? Fast? Students may be interested to identify the different types of instruments here: organ, harp, lute, drum, tambourine and cymbals and to research these instruments. (Mitrano, 51) How long have these instruments been played, in the history of music? The child models for this work are not known, but they may have been based on some of the many professional child musicians during the Renaissance. Students will be intrigued to learn that ordinary children in Florence, from middle class to orphans, often left school at the age of eight to work in the arts. “Those who showed a gift for music even received special tuition…” (Toti, 32).

Students may be interested to learn that this artist, Della Robbia, did an apprenticeship as a goldsmith as a child before becoming a sculptor, and this was a common progression for a career in those days. Working with gold taught Della Robbia to become extremely technically
proficient and exact. The children look perfect—too perfect. (And why do the children look so muscular? Do they work out in the gym and take steroids? Perhaps this is part of the artist’s odd idealization). About this work, the author of The Opera del Duomo Museum in Florence writes, “The overall effect is one of classical grace and composure, typical of the full renaissance style; the artist’s technical mastery is all the more astonishing when we recall that this is his very first known work.” (Mitrano, 113).

Donatello’s choir loft, below, depicts the rollicking putti. Here, embedded in the ornate, highly controlled loft, we see children going wild—a tangle of limbs blurring by. The contrast between the children in the two lofts should make for rousing class discussion. Students may indentify with the personalities of the children in one loft more than other. They may also be

Figure 4: Donatello’s Choir Loft, Picture taken by deCourcy Hinds, May 25, 2008

fascinated to learn about how sculptors capture emotion, rhythm and speed through marble. The
following quotation from the Opera del Duomo catalog perfectly illustrates why the contrast between these works is worth exploring in the classroom:

The agitated and almost frenzied rhythm of [Donatello’s] composition…sets up an opposition to the work of Luca. The treatment of the material is also utterly different: whereas the young Della Robbia polishes his figures and exactly defines their contours, anticipating in some way his future work in glazed terracotta, Donatello treats his surfaces roughly and approximately in a fashion which the genius of Michelangelo would alter develop in his celebrated non finito. It would be fascinating to know whether and to what extend the two artists came to an agreement about their different approaches to the work assigned to them. The fact that on this occasion two great artists together produced two different views of life, two antithetical modes of conceiving of the world: the ‘Apollonian’ one of Luca, and the ‘Dionysian’ one of Donatello.”

(Mandragora, 115).

**Research Questions:**

- What are putti? How are they like/unlike cupid?
- Why does one loft capture real children, and the other putti?

![Figure 5 Detail, Donatello's Cantoria, deCourcy Hinds, May 25, 2008.](image)
Although there was not a single approach to portraying children during the Renaissance, and artistic styles varied, there was a common theme: Florence respected and cherished its children; this was all the more poignant when these children were orphans. At the historic Santa Maria Della Scala Hospital in Siena, we find the Pellegrinaio Ward, where “pilgrims, wayfarers, and the sick and orphans were cared for” (Toti, 28).

Figure 6 Santa Maria Della Scala Fresco, picture by deCourcy Hinds
Orphans grew up and received an education in the decorate ward in Siena (which looks like a palace), and their lives are captured in a wall of frescoes. Domenico di Bartolo’s fresco, “Welcoming, Education and Matrimony of a Daughter of the Hospital” epitomizes a Renaissance humanist perspective, concerned with the child’s health and intellectual potential. The color choices and style are highly representative of “northern Renaissance frescoes.” (Toti, 43). To give students a background in Italian Renaissance fresco painting, a teacher can share some of the following basics:

“Fresco Painting, in the strict sense, applies to painting done on freshly laid wet plaster, usually on wall surfaces. The term has come to be used for mural painting in general. But as expressed in the Italian word fresco (fresh), from which the term is derived, the technique of true fresco demands that mineral colors, thinned with water, be applied on a layer of smooth wet plaster consisting of pure, high-calcium lime. The colors do not penetrate into the plaster, which is already saturated with water, but are retained in the extremely thin top layer. When the layer hardens, the colors eventually solidify in it and become part of it. One characteristic of this marble-like top layer—in solubility in water—allows the painting to withstand the effects of centuries of time and weathering and also permits the use of techniques by which a fresco is removed from a wall when necessary for preservation or relocation.” (Baldini, Encyclopedia Americana, Retrieved August 03, 2008)

Research Questions:

- Why & how were hospitals for children decorated with frescoes?
- What minerals were used to paint frescoes? What scientific properties of frescoes enable them to survive for centuries?
- What is the connection between humanism and frescoes that depict orphan life?

When introducing this piece to the class, a teacher might ask students to reflect on what they know of orphanages they’ve read about, or seen depicted in movies. What do they imagine most orphanages look and feel like? How does this orphanage differ from the typical image of
the orphanage as a hardscrabble place? Students will be surprised and pleased to see how well Italian orphans seemed to be treated. During the Renaissance, this hospital in Siena, like

Figure 7 Detail from Bartolo: Children Studying, picture by deCourcy Hinds

Florentine institutions cared for orphans from infancy through adulthood. Thus, this fresco depicts an orphan’s life cycle, from the days of being tended by a wet-nurse to education (note the sternness of the teacher), to moments of play, to marriage “in refined dress worthy of a court scene.” (Toti, 37). Additionally, it should be noted that the orphans engaged in study are clean and well-dressed, the folds in their clothes depicted here with geometric precision.
According to the catalog of the Hospital of the Innocents Museum, babies would often arrive at the orphanage in rags, but would quickly be clad in “a layette of strips of linen and wool, generally white and also various shades of red, purple and vermillion.” (Sandri 16). “Children wore a little white frock that left the legs bare. The older children of school age wore a cherub logo pinned to their chests. Stockings and clogs, for both sexes and little hats for the boys only…We know the little girls, the ‘maidens’ of the convent…wore long white dresses.” (Sandri 17). Mothers, or other adults who surrendered infants to the orphanage, would leave a “marker” on the baby with the hope that when the family’s economic condition improved, they could return to the orphanage and reclaim the child. This rarely happened. But it was very important for impoverished families to cling to hope, and so they often put a great deal of care into designing a unique marker. These markers, preserved in the ephemera collection of the Hospital of the Innocents Museums, include “coins split in half...and little necklaces,” as well as less permanent items like ripped scraps of cloth and “written prayers and suggestions.” (Sandri, 13).
The wet-nurses who took in the orphans saved these items and kept careful records of the children. “Comments were made on their physical conditions and also a complete inventory of things [the mother left them].” (Sandri 17). The thoroughness of these records reflected the orphanage’s level of caring for the orphans as individuals, despite the often overcrowded conditions. At the Hospital of the Innocents in Florence, as well as Maria Della Scala in Siena, orphans received a good education. “Florentine humanism exalts the ideal virtues of the child and values its role in society….The birth of children’s societies is also a demonstration of how humanistic pedagogy distinguished also the various stages of life…In Florence, between 1400 and 1500, there was therefore a coordinated effort among the humanists, clerics and civil authorities…to protect and at the same time discipline its young citizens…” (Maggi, 7-8).
The Renaissance viewed poor children with optimism. “Differently from other eras when [poor children] would go to work in the fields, the Renaissance period is distinguished by the educational routes for the children of the hospital, ways that reflect those followed within richer families of Florentine society.” These educations were very strict and religious, but children had many options—no doors were closed to them. “The Hospital…offered its more gifted charges the study of singing and music, painting and sculpture.” (Sandri, 11).

Figure 9 Documentation of Orphans' Lives, Hospital of the Innocents, from Renaissance of Children by Alessandra Maggi, 2007.

It was also documented that orphan children ate well. Although today’s children would cringe to hear the menu, Florentine Renaissance orphans were delighted to eat “seafood
including shrimp, cockles, eels, carp, pike and dace,” and drink “salt water and fresh water,”
(Sandri, 15). (*Salt* water?! Who knew!)

The document on the previous page records the abandonment of the very first newborn at
the Hospital of the Innocents on February 5, 1444. Lapo di Piero Pacini, who served as the
financial director of the hospital, “notes meticulously the details of abandonment of Agata
Smeralda, a baby girl left in the basin [a clay wash basin].” He records the name of her first wet-
nurse, and then the change of wet nurse two months later, in April. (Sandri, 24-25).

The final group of Renaissance children to be explored are artist apprentices. Students
will be fascinated to learn that Florentine children were chosen to become artists and adopted by
patrons when they were as young as eight. Michelangelo got a rather late start, at fourteen, when
Lorenzo Medici recognized his talent the day he sculpted a faun in his garden. The story of his
discovery has been called “legendary,” and some scholars have argued that it isn’t fully accurate,
but it’s still the best documentation we have of Michelangelo’s early drive to succeed.
(Strathern, 195).

As the story goes, Michelangelo boldly went to the home of Lorenzo, “the Magnificent”
around 1480, in the Garden of San Marco. Joining friend Francesco Granacci, with whom
he was an apprentice in Gherlandaio’s workshop, he went to meet other students who were
studying the Medici collection. During this visit, Michelangelo completed a sculpture of an “old
grinaing sartyr.” (Strathern, 195). Medici happened to notice Michelangelo’s work, and, seeing
this sculpture, “the Magnificent gently teased the young artist about the perfect set of teeth he
had put in the old man’s mouth. Considering the age, he should have lost some of his teeth,
Lorenzo said playfully to Michelangelo.” The young boy feigned indifference, but when Lorenzo
had his back turned, Michelangelo knocked some of the faun’s teeth out, and drilled the gums as
if to show that the teeth had fallen out with the root. This swift, clever correction highly impressed Lorenzo. And with this, Michelangelo’s “fortune was made.” The next day, “Lorenzo…spoke with Michelangelo’s father and arranged to take the boy to live with him in the palace in Via Larga, where he would be seated at Lorenzo’s table, among his children.” (Crispino, 14). Many sources confirm that Michelangelo’s talent blossomed while he was surrounded by Medici’s collection of painting and sculpture. Surrounded by such intense beauty, the young artist thrived.

When discussing the story of Michelangelo and the faun, a teacher might ask students some of the following questions: What did the young artist’s action of knocking out of the faun’s teeth reveal about him? Why did this impress Lorenzo so much, and make him think that Michelangelo would be a good apprentice?

Students can also compare this incident in Michelangelo’s life to one that occurred when the artist was 26, and sculpting “David.” While he was completing this masterpiece, a man named Sodierni who had commissioned the work stopped Michelangelo and said, “The nose is too big!” Michelangelo was outraged, but “…controlled his anger,” and “…without a word, he climbed the scaffolding, holding a chisel in one hand, whilst with the other casually swept up some marble dust lying on the plans. Standing so his back obscured what he was doing, he pretended to chip away at the nose, letting a trickle of marble dust fall from his hand as he did so. Then he stepped back, calling down to Soderini, ‘Look at it now.’ ‘I like it better,” Soderini replied.” (Strathern, 238.)

A teacher can ask students: How is the child Michelangelo different from the adult Michelangelo? How does he respond to criticism differently from one story to the next? And
how do his responses serve him well in both instances? Students should be able to identify with both Michelangeloes here. Most children have had the experience of an authority figure, usually a teacher, offering helpful or unhelpful criticism. These stories about Michelangelo provide the framework for some interesting classroom discussions about the artistic process, and the value, harm, and sometimes uselessness of criticism.
The two sculptures depicted here that capture Michelangelo and the faun were sculpted in the late 19th century by cousins Emilio Zocchi and Cesare Zocchi, who had a family workshop and made many copies of this sculpture. (http://www.casabuonarroti.it). Although these marble sculptures are similar in style, they offer two slightly different interpretations of the Michelangelo’ personality and attitude as an artist apprentice.

In Emilio Zocchi’s rendition, the artist is straddled around the block of marble, hunched over his work as he lifts the chisel up at chin-level. In Cesare Zocchi’s sculpture, the artist is standing—indeed, standing on one leg, with his foot playfully wrapped around his calf. Cesare’s work portraits Michelangelo as more elfin, more acrobatic, and perhaps more child-like, while Emilo’s sitting statue seems more serene and therefore adult. However, it’s open for interpretation which Michelangelo sculpture seems more or less serious. Students will chime in
with different opinions. In both sculptures, the artist appears to be the same age. He is also
clothed in the same smock-like outfit with tights and pointed shoes and a stocking cap.
Compare/contrast exercises are very useful for beginning art-history students, as they invite
students to hone their observational and descriptive skills.

One odd detail in Cesare Zocchi’s sculpture is the snail that appears at the base of the
marble, near Michelangelo’s feet. This detail seems random. What is the snail doing there,
anyway? Students in the classroom may offer theories or ideas of what the snail symbolizes.
Perhaps it suggests a playful, childish side of the artist, suggesting that despite Michelangelo’s
great talents, he may still be a rough and tumble boy who plays outside and would enjoy digging
up snails in the mud.

Figure 12 Photo by deCourcy Hinds

Teachers may choose to explore the notion that the faun mask was Michelangelo’s
earliest known work. What does this first work reveal about the artist’s potential? Looking at the
faun, would students guess that Michelangelo would be capable of making “David”? And which
sculpture do students like better, David or the faun? Some students may indeed prefer the faun.
Sadly, Michelangelo’s mask was lost when it was transferred to the Museo del Bargello during World War II. (http://www.casabuonarroti.it). However, some argue that a mask currently in the Bargello is a copy of the original. This hasn’t been proven. However, there’s no denying the appeal of this funny face:

![Faun Mask, Presumed a copy of Michelangelo, Bargello Museum](image)

Students will surely be impressed by Michelangelo’s talents as a child, and, as a result, may become more curious about the artist’s later work. The faun may also inspire children’s own mask projects.

**Conclusion:** This essay only offers a small taste of the many rich possibilities for teaching about children of the Renaissance. Children represented Florence’s pride and joy—as we saw in the example of the Cantoria choir lofts, which were decorated with child motifs to celebrate the completion of the Duomo after 140 years. Orphan children were raised in beautiful hospitals
decorated with frescoes that depicted scenes from their lives. Florence’s kindness towards poor children was evidenced in the supervisors’ careful record keeping, and preservation of their jewelry “markers” and other keepsakes. Finally, through the story of Michelangelo and the faun, we see that Lorenzo Medici had a shrewd eye for recognizing young talent. Even though this event occurred when Michelangelo was only fourteen, it altered the course of his life, and the course of art history. Studying the children of the Renaissance underlines the fact that children’s lives and talents are profoundly important to the world.
Sources:


A Note on the Pictures:

The author of this paper saw all of the artwork in person, and attempted to document the work with a digital camera whenever possible. In some cases, postcards of the artwork, or books containing pictures, captured superior pictures, and were purchased at the museum and then scanned at home. The photographer and designer of these postcards were not known, otherwise credit would have been offered where due.