

THE
NATIONAL
GALLERY

TEACHERS' NOTES

2019–20



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Trumpets blare, the ground shakes, and two armies on horseback clash in the Italian countryside. It is a distant time when soldiers wear ornate armour, and cities, not just countries, go to war. But how much of this is fact, and how much is fiction?

This enormous painting is one of a series of three showing a battle that actually took place. The other two panels are in the Uffizi, Florence, and the Louvre, Paris – originally they would have hung together in a grand room of a large house in Florence.

In the top left and right-hand corners of the painting you can just see faint curved marks where it originally fit into an arched ceiling. About 60cm is believed to be missing from the top of the painting, which was cut down and had top corners added to make the panel rectangular. This was probably done at a later date, when it was moved to another building.

All images in this document are details of Paolo Uccello, *Niccolò Mauruzi da Tolentino at the Battle of San Romano*, probably about 1438–40

The battle

The painting is dominated by the man in the centre, rearing up on a white horse and pointing his commander's baton. Instead of a helmet, he wears an elaborate hat made from red and gold fabric (the painting uses real gold leaf). He is one of the few figures whose face you can actually see, along with his page (the boy behind him carrying his helmet).

The commander leads the charge of knights on horseback, lances raised. All charge from left to right except for one lone figure on the other side of the painting, fighting three men off with a hammer. Is this all that's left of the opposition?

You can easily guess which side has the upper hand: the charging group represents the city of Florence, and the lone defender represents the city of Siena.

600 years ago, Italy was not the united country it is today; it was a collection of cities and states, each with their own rulers and ambitions. Florence was a powerful city, but it wanted to expand and control a wider area. It was at war with Lucca, a city on the coast to the west and an important trading port. When Lucca's allies Siena, Pisa, and Milan threatened to surround Florence and cut it off from the coast, it needed to take action.

On 1 June 1432 Florence's soldiers fought against a much larger army of soldiers from Siena in a valley outside the small town of San Romano, 30 miles west of Florence. For eight hours the soldiers clashed, Florence charging three times at Siena. The heat in the heavy suits of armour must have been stifling, and an exhausted Florence would have lost, had reinforcements not arrived late in the day and Siena ordered its forces to retreat.



Condottieri – knights for hire

The man leading the Florentine army is Niccolò da Tolentino, a hired soldier known as a condottiere (plural 'condottieri'). Cities would often not be big enough to train and look after a large army, so they hired soldiers led by these condottieri. They were both generals and businessmen, signing a contract, or 'condotta', promising to fight for the city and no one else for a period of one or two years. After their contract was over, the strict rule was that they weren't allowed to fight against the city they'd just been employed by for at least a year.

The most successful condottieri became famous, the celebrities of their day, and could be rewarded with statues or paintings of them by the cities they fought for. Niccolò da Tolentino is celebrated here, dominating the centre of the painting. We can recognise him by his symbol, the 'Solomon's Knot', on the flag curling in the breeze above him. It also appears on a painted monument to him in Florence Cathedral (the Duomo). His red hat was a reward presented to him after the battle, so he wouldn't have been able to wear it into the clash. In this picture Uccello shows him both fighting to win and celebrating victory at the same time.



A matter of perspective

Uccello has tried to make the painting appear three-dimensional, to give the impression that this is a landscape you could travel into. The broken lances on the floor have been carefully arranged to give a sense of linear perspective (parallel lines which converge at a point in the distance). They also create a rough grid, something which Uccello would have used to help him compose the picture, working out where each figure would go.

Although the figures in the background are much smaller than in the foreground, Uccello hasn't created a landscape that slowly recedes into the distance; he's placed a hedge in the middle with everything in front of it one size, and everything behind it another size. There's also a fallen knight face down on the ground, but he doesn't look quite right. The top half of his body should be much smaller to show he's receding back into the painting.

Uccello lived through the early Renaissance and was fascinated by the study of perspective. He likely had mathematical training too, but the odd looking knight is probably a mistake. We should bear in mind that the painting has changed a lot since it was first made: severe cleaning over the years has left the horses looking flat and toy-like, the muddy purple harness on Niccolò da Tolentino's horse has now faded from its original bright red. The painting was also intended to hang higher on the wall in its Florentine home, forcing you to look up at a steeper angle. If the sky was included in the arched top that is now missing, the perspective may have looked a little less strange.



Reality meets fiction

This painting helps Uccello tell a story rather than depict reality. It is a grand piece of decoration for a wealthy family who were keen to make a political point.

The Bartolini Salimbeni family commissioned Uccello to paint this (and the other two paintings in the series) for their house in Florence. They were wealthy and important figures in the rival town of Siena, but had come to live in Florence and were keen to show their pride and loyalty for the city that was now their home. The paintings must have communicated Florence's power and success effectively because in the 1490s they were seized by Lorenzo de' Medici and hung in his palace. He was arguably the city's most famous and powerful ruler, and an important patron who supported artists such as Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo.

Art had long been used to make grand political statements in Italy. Ancient Roman sculpture often celebrated its military leaders by showing them in the centre of a battle or in a triumphal procession. These long panel sculptures (friezes), would have been known to Uccello who had studied sculpture under his master, Ghiberti, and through his friend, Donatello.

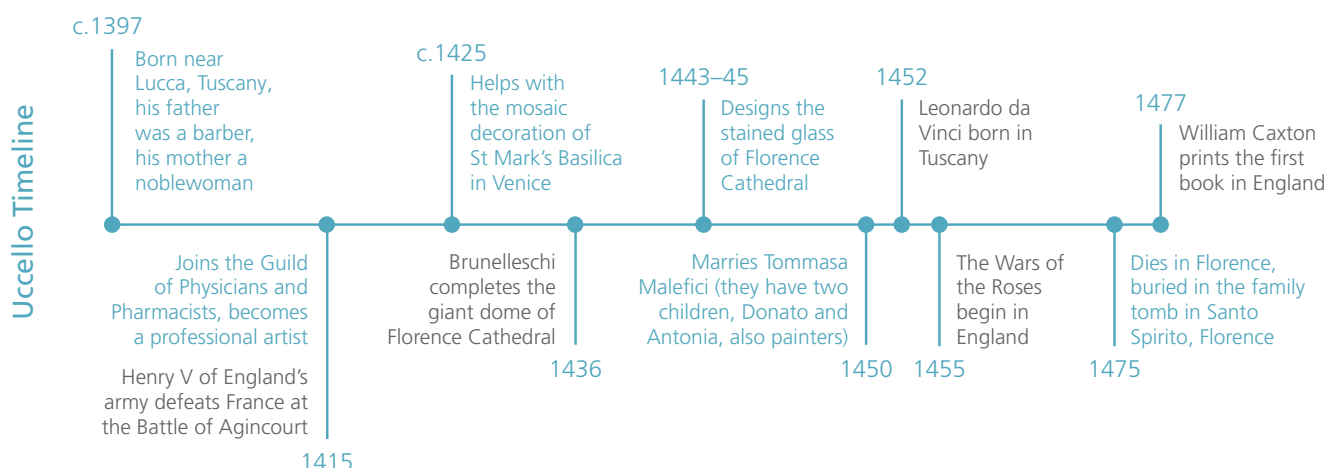
Knowing who would be looking at the painting, Uccello has carefully tailored it to suit his audience. The knights look more like the upper classes would expect them to: not at a battle, but at a parade or tournament, where helmets and clothing are more elaborate and a little less practical. The battle shows no blood; it is more like a costume drama that has sanitised the conflict for its audience.

The armour the knights are wearing is accurately painted, so Uccello likely had a real set of armour to study. It has been gilded with real silver leaf which has badly tarnished over time. You can imagine the effect it would have had when the painting was new, the army gleaming brilliantly in candlelight.

The hedgerow in the middle of the painting is laden with oranges, roses, and a few pomegranates (on the far right). It is likely symbolic, not something the soldiers would have fought alongside: the rose was a Christian symbol for martyrdom (dying for your faith); the orange was seen as a fruit of paradise; the pomegranate often represented rebirth. All three add colour and decoration, but they may well also give deeper meaning to the battle scene. Even Niccolò da Tolentino's hat bears a pomegranate flower pattern, suggesting Uccello meant to fill this painting with details that magnify the achievement of the charging knights, heroes putting their lives on the line for Florence.

What was the Renaissance?

The Renaissance era (c.1400–1550) marked the 'rebirth' of forgotten knowledge from the past. It was the foundation of the modern Europe we know today. Greek mythology and medicine were rediscovered, Arabic linear perspective and advanced maths were used to design buildings and artworks, the printing press was invented, navigation to America became possible, long-range cannons and muskets led to the decline of castles and knights, the Church of England was founded, and the biographies of past and living artists were published for the first time.



Links and related paintings

The Uffizi and the Louvre house the other two paintings of Uccello's 'Battle of San Romano' series - uffizi.it/en, louvre.fr/en

The V&A, the Wallace Collection, and the Ashmolean Museum have collections of medieval armour - vam.ac.uk, wallacecollection.org, ashmolean.org

How to make egg tempera paint - instructables.com/id/Egg-Tempera-Painting/

A painting by Lorenzetti showing what a medieval Italian town would have looked like - bit.ly/2XPdswB

Celebration/pride

Cione – *The San Pier Maggiore Altarpiece (The Coronation of the Virgin)*
 Poussin – *The Triumph of Pan*
 Rubens – *A Roman Triumph*

Identity

Botticelli – *Venus and Mars*
 Holbein – *The Ambassadors*
 Molenaer – *Two Boys and a Girl making Music*

Knight and battles

Moroni – *A Knight with his Jousting Helmet*
 Goya – *The Duke of Wellington*
 Reynolds – *Colonel Tarleton*

Perspective

Cima – *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas*
 Crivelli – *The Annunciation*
 Uccello – *Saint George and the Dragon*

Discussion points

Winning and losing

When have you won or lost something? How did it feel? What sort of things can you win and lose? Is this different if you are on your own or part of a group? What does it mean to be a 'good winner' or a 'bad loser'? Which ways do people celebrate winning? How do people deal with losing? How could you measure winning and losing? Are there times when it's difficult to agree on who won or lost? How might you win and lose at the same time? Must there always be winners and losers?

Telling tales

What are your favourite stories and what are the parts you like the best? Who are the main characters in them? How can you spot the main characters in paintings? How can you tell what people are doing in paintings? Have you ever said something that wasn't true? What does it mean to tell the truth or tell a lie? Have you ever told a story with some true bits and some made-up bits? Why might people lie? What is exaggerating, and have you ever done it? Is it the same as lying? Is making up a story the same as lying? Are there times when it is bad to tell the truth, or good to lie? What is the difference between fact and opinion? How can you tell them apart?

Identity

What are your favourite possessions, and why? What are your favourite clothes, and why? Do you wear the same types of clothes all the time? When do you wear different clothes, and why? What do your best clothes look like? Are they the same as your comfiest clothes? When do you wear your best clothes? How do you pose for a photograph? What clothes or objects show that you belong to a certain place (school, city, country)? What do your clothes say about you? Are there any objects that let people know who you are and what you like? Have you ever used clothes or props to pretend to be someone else? How did it make you feel? Do you wear the same sort of clothes you wore a year ago? What might you wear when you're older?

Shape and space

Which different shapes can you see in the picture? Which shapes are sharp, and which are smooth? Do any shapes feel calm to you? Do any shapes feel full of energy? Which shapes point you in a certain direction? Which shapes make you stop and look at them? Which shapes look like they're coming out of the painting at you? Which ones look like they're going off into the distance? Where are acute, obtuse, and right angles used? What is the ratio between the size of the figures in the foreground and those in the background?