

Learn Italian with Art ep. 2

short version



This is an excerpt of the complete 31-minute video that is part of our video course Learn Italian with Art, available for purchase in 2021.

Piero della Francesca - La Pala di Brera

Welcome to the second episode of Learn Italian with Art.

Today we will take a closer look at another great master of the Rinascimento italiano, Piero della Francesca, whose limpid and rigorous painting reveals a deep knowledge of mathematical and perspective rules. Piero places his figures in an ideal universe, and his paintings often have several levels of meaning. With his help, you will learn some useful vocabulary for describing a painting and together we will learn more about the formation of present and past participles.

Analizziamo insieme uno dei capolavori di Piero della Francesca, la Pala di Brera.



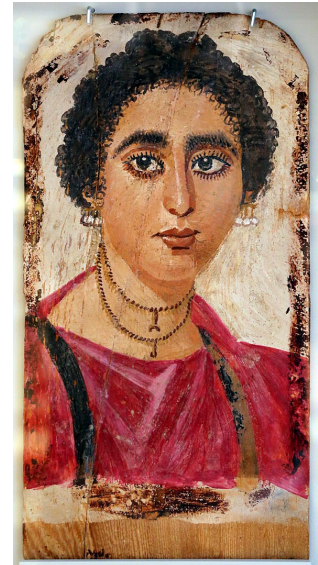
Il quadro che vediamo è un dipinto su **tavola** che si trova nella **pinacoteca** di Brera a Milano. Il termine **pala** indica che era destinato a essere collocato su un altare.

This is a painting on wood on display in the Brera Art Gallery in Milan.

The word *pala*, altarpiece, indicates that it was intended to be placed on an altar.

Tavola: in art the word *tavola* indicates a wooden panel on which the artist painted his work, and this is the original meaning of the word, wooden board. The word *tavola* is found in several phrases: *tavola da pranzo*, dining table, *vino da tavola*, table wine, *il mare è una tavola*, the sea is flat, without waves, *mettiamo le carte in tavola*, let's lay our cards on the table, *tavola periodica*, periodic table, and many others.

Fayum mummy portrait, tempera on wood
ca. 2nd century BC



A **pinacoteca** is an art gallery, one devoted to paintings. It comes from the Greek word *pinax*, painting, and *theke*, box, collection, hence a collection of paintings.

Now let's break down one more paragraph. Here you'll learn phrases used when describing the arrangement of figures in a painting:

La **scena è ambientata** in un grande tempio marmoreo che **ricorda** un monumento romano di età imperiale, con **lesene, cornici, archi, volte a botte** e, nella **volta absidale**, una grande conchiglia decorativa da cui pende un uovo, il centro simbolico di tutta la composizione.

The scene is set in a large marble temple, which resembles a Roman monument of the Imperial Age, with pilasters, mouldings, arches, barrel vaults and, in the apse vault, a large decorative shell from which an egg is hanging, the symbolic centre of the whole composition.

La scena è ambientata: the scene is set. This phrase is the first step to describe the arrangement of figures in a painting; we'll see more of them a little further on. We can say: *la scena è ambientata in una valle*, *la scena è ambientata in un fastoso palazzo*, and so on.

Che ricorda: *un tempio che ricorda un monumento romano*, here the verb *ricordare* means to resemble, to recall, to be similar to something else. *Questo*

pittore ricorda Caravaggio, this painter resembles Caravaggio, or is similar to Caravaggio, or evokes Caravaggio.

Lesene, cornici, archi, volte a botte, volta absidale: these are all technical terms that belong to architecture. There is not much to explain about the origin or use of these terms, the important thing is to remember them because they are very common in this kind of texts.

Lesena is a decorative pilaster, usually with no structural function; **cornice** here is a decorative moulding, otherwise it means frame; **arco** is arch; **volta a botte** is barrel vault, and **volta absidale** is apse vault, semi-dome.

The Pala di Brera, like many great masterpieces, is a polysemantic work, that is, it can be read at various levels of meaning. There's a theological message, which concerns dogmas like the immaculate conception; it conveys a political message as well: the painting has a public destination, it celebrates the authority of the duke Federico da Montefeltro who pays homage to the Virgin wearing a refined armour, a masterpiece of military technology. Finally, the painting reveals a private meaning: it was probably commissioned in memory of the duke's beloved wife Battista Sforza, who died a few months after the birth of their son Guidobaldo, the long-awaited heir.



Piero della Francesca,
Doppio ritratto dei duchi di Urbino
1467 - 1472

Time now for one more paragraph, where some of the most common symbols of Christian iconography are mentioned:

La **simbologia** continua nella figura del Bambino dormiente su una pelle di agnello, al collo un rametto di corallo: nell'**iconografia** cristiana l'agnello e il ramo di corallo sono un chiaro **riferimento alla** Passione di Cristo; il corallo ricorda il colore del sangue, ripreso anche nella fascia della cornice. La **posa** del Bambino ricorda quella della Pietà, altra **prefigurazione** della Passione.

The symbolism continues in the figure of the Child asleep on a lambskin, with a small branch of coral around the neck. In Christian iconography the lamb and the coral branch are a clear reference to the passion of Christ; the coral recalls the colour of blood, which also appears in the band of the moulding. The Child's pose resembles the Pietà, another prefiguration of Christ's Passion.

Piero della Francesca,
Madonna di Senigallia
1470 - 1485



Terms like **simbologia**, **simbolo**, **iconografia**, **riferimento a**, **posa**, **prefigurazione** are high-frequency terms in this kind of context; the good thing is, they are very similar to English, so it shouldn't be too difficult to understand and remember them.

It's now **grammar time**! In this lesson we'll study participles: what they are and how to use them. English speakers are familiar with the concept of participle clauses, which enable us to convey information in a more concise way.

The participle is a word that "participates" in the characteristics of both verbs and adjectives. It is often used as an adjective, as a noun, to form compound tenses or in subordinate clauses.

The participle has two tenses: present and past.

1. The present participle

The **present participle** is used mainly as an adjective or a noun.

Un dipinto **affascinante** - A fascinating painting.

Un artista **interessante** - An interesting artist.

Una mostra **deludente** - A disappointing exhibition.

Here the present participles *affascinante, interessante, deludente* are all used as adjectives.

Grammar point

The present participle is formed by the root of the verb and the ending -ante or -ente. Some verbs belonging to the third conjugation use the suffix -iente, as we saw with *dormiente*. More details in our grammar worksheet.

CANTARE —> CANT —> CANTANTE
SORRIDERE —> SORRID —> SORRIDENTE
DORMIRE —> DORMI —> DORMIENTE

Let's see some examples of present participles functioning as nouns:

Quella **cantante** ha una voce angelica - That singer has an angelic voice.

L'**insegnante** ha molta esperienza - The teacher has a lot of experience.

Gli **studenti** di disegno hanno ottenuto buoni risultati - Drawing students have achieved good results.

Cantante, insegnante, studenti are all present participles and nouns.

2. The past participle

The **past participle** can be used as adjective or noun; in its verbal function it's used to form compound tenses, to form the passive voice and in subordinate clauses.

Grammar point

The past participle is formed by the root of the verb and the ending -ato, -uto or -ito.

CANTARE → CANT → CANTATO
SEDERE → SED → SEDUTO
DORMIRE → DORMI → DORMITO

We have come to the end of our second lesson on the Italian you need in the context of history of art. We introduced some useful vocabulary, especially phrases used when describing the arrangement of figures in a painting. Finally, we learnt about the formation and usage of present and past participles.

Read carefully our Grammar & Vocabulary Worksheet for this video. In our next lesson another great masterpiece of the past is waiting for us, and the grammar focus will be passato prossimo, the Italian present perfect.

The complete 31-minute version of this video includes detailed explanations of present participle and past participle and an introduction to passato prossimo. The complete Italian text and an English translation are provided below.

Learn Italian with Art is a 6-video package. Episode 1 is freely available on YouTube, while samples of the other videos are published as soon as they are ready.

Have a look at [this page](#) to know more.

Learn Italian with Art

1. Sandro Botticelli
2. Piero della Francesca
3. Raffaello
4. Caravaggio
5. Michelangelo
6. Paolo Veronese

Complete Italian text - long version

Il quadro che vediamo è un dipinto su tavola che si trova nella pinacoteca di Brera a Milano. Il termine pala indica che era destinato a essere collocato su un altare.

Vi è rappresentata la Madonna con il Bambino, angeli, santi e il committente. Questo tipo di raffigurazione è generalmente chiamata Sacra Conversazione. Il quadro è oggi conosciuto come Pala di Brera per la sua collocazione, ed è considerato la più originale e importante sacra conversazione di tutto il Quattrocento.

La scena è ambientata in un grande tempio marmoreo che ricorda un monumento romano di età imperiale, con lesene, cornici, archi, volte a botte e, nella volta absidale, una grande conchiglia decorativa da cui pende un uovo, il centro simbolico di tutta la composizione.

I personaggi sono disposti a semicerchio. Al centro vediamo la Vergine in trono che veglia sul Bambino addormentato; da sinistra vediamo san Giovanni Battista, san Bernardino da Siena e san Girolamo; da destra, san Giovanni Evangelista, san Pietro Martire e san Francesco; sullo sfondo, quattro angeli. In primo piano sulla destra vediamo il committente, il duca Federico II da Montefeltro, vestito di una sfavillante corazza, simbolo del suo potere militare.

La simbologia dell'opera è complessa: la conchiglia e l'uovo sono simbolo di nascita, di resurrezione, della concezione virgine di Gesù; l'uovo allude inoltre a uno dei simboli araldici dei Montefeltro, lo struzzo.

La simbologia continua nella figura del Bambino dormiente su una pelle di agnello, al collo un rametto di corallo: nell'iconografia cristiana l'agnello e il ramo di corallo sono un chiaro riferimento alla Passione di Cristo; il corallo ricorda il colore del sangue, ripreso anche nella fascia della cornice. La posa del Bambino ricorda quella della Pietà, altra prefigurazione della Passione.

English translation - long version

This is a painting on wood on display in the Brera art gallery in Milan. The term "pala", altarpiece, indicates that it was intended to be placed on an altar.

It depicts the Madonna and Child, angels, saints and the donor: this type of representation is generally called Holy Conversation. The painting is today known as Pala di Brera because of its location, and is considered the most original and important holy conversation of the whole 15th century.

The scene is set in a large marble temple, reminiscent of a Roman monument of the Imperial Age, with pilasters, frames, arches, barrel vaults and, in the apse vault, a large decorative shell from which an egg is hanging, the symbolic centre of the whole composition.

The characters are arranged in a semicircle: in the centre we see the Virgin enthroned, watching over the sleeping Child; from the left we see Saint John the Baptist, Saint Bernardine of Siena and Saint Jerome; from the right, Saint John the Evangelist, Saint Peter the Martyr and Saint Francis; on the background, four angels. On the foreground on the right we see the donor, Duke Federico II of Montefeltro, dressed in a shining armour, symbol of his military power.

The symbolism of the work is complex: the shell and the egg are symbols of birth, resurrection and the virginal conception of Jesus; the egg also alludes to one of the heraldic symbols of the Montefeltro, the ostrich. The symbolism continues in the figure of the Child asleep on a lambskin, with a small branch of coral around the neck: in Christian iconography the lamb and the coral branch are a clear reference to the Passion of Christ; the coral recalls the colour of blood, which also appears in the band of the moulding. The Child's pose resembles the Pietà, another prefiguration of Christ's Passion.

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Millard Meiss, Symbol and Allusion in Piero Della Francesca's Montefeltro Altarpiece, Princeton UP 1954

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Music in the video:

Giovanni Gabrieli, Jubilate Deo - performed by John Rutter, the Cambridge Singers & La Nuova Musica (2009)