

Lorenzo Ghiberti, *Jacob and Esau Panel*, from *Gates of Paradise*, 1425–52  
Renaissance relief sculpture



**Key Facts:**

**Artist:** Lorenzo Ghiberti was an Italian Renaissance artist who lived from 1378-1455.

**Art period/style:** Early Renaissance (1400-1500), Florence, Italy

**Key characteristics of that period:** Artists started to break away from traditions of the Gothic and Byzantine styles (flat, elongated figures). Early Renaissance art had more naturalistic and life-like figures. The figures also started to have a sense of psyche or emotion. The word “Renaissance” means rebirth. This era was centered on a rebirth of Classical ideas and styles from ancient Greece and Rome. Artwork of the Renaissance was balanced, calm, harmonious, and had a sense of naturalism. The compositions were generally balanced and had limited emotion, and there was a focus on studying anatomy. Linear perspective was also invented during the Renaissance and added to the realistic sense of space in art.

**Techniques:** Relief sculpture, bronze casting. Lost-wax was used: a method of casting a sculpture in which a model of the sculpture is made from wax. The model is used to make a mold. Then, when the mold has set, the wax is melted away, leaving the mold ready to be used to cast the sculpture in bronze.

## Some Background:

The *Gates of Paradise* are gilded bronze doors (1425–52) for the Baptistery of San Giovanni in Florence, Italy. The doors have 10 panels of relief sculptures that show stories from the Old Testament. Lorenzo Ghiberti's *Gates of Paradise* represent passages from the Old Testament. These bronze relief sculpture panels took 27 years to make. His attention to detail and realism can be seen here. He even incorporated linear perspective into these reliefs. These 17 ft. tall, three-ton bronze doors became an icon of the Renaissance.

## The Five Core Habits:

Practice the *Five Core Habits of Grammar* with art - NAMES (found on pgs. 18-19 in the Foundation Guide). Part of teaching is learning to ask a student good questions. This is a great activity for looking at art! Plus, you get to sneak in a little art history and technique along with.

# 5 CORE HABITS



### NAMING

1. What do you call this?
2. Where does this name come from?
3. Are there any other names for this?



### ATTENDING

1. What are the parts of this?
2. Where do you usually see this?
3. What makes this special?



### MEMORIZING

1. What would help you memorize this? An acronym, a song, a chant, a picture, etc.
2. What did you already know about this?



### EXPRESSING

1. Could you draw a picture of this or write a song about it? Could you act it out?
2. How does this make you feel?



### STORYTELLING

1. Can you tell me a story about this?
2. Can I tell you a story about this?

N names (name things specifically)

A attending (look and listen carefully. Also- taste, smell, touch. Compare things.)

M memorizing (soak up facts and ideas. Memorize facts and relations of things to recall, connect, and expand new ideas to older ones from past memorizations.)

E expressing (express ideas creatively- reciting, drawing, singing, dancing)

S storytelling (hear and tell stories)

This helps us grasp the basic elements, vocabulary, and rules of any subject, and helps us progress more quickly toward comprehension and creativity in future studies.

Using the image on the first page, go through these questions:

### N – Names:

- Name the artist, era/art style, and technique
- What can you find? Name the things you see
- Who do you see?
- What animals do you see?
- Where are they?
- What colors do you see?
- What textures are in the sculpture?

## A – Attending

- What do you see?
- Who are the people? What are they doing?
- What do the people in the sculpture see?
- What do they hear? Smell? Taste?
- What might they feel/touch?
- What emotions might they be feeling?
- What things can you compare?
- What could the animals symbolize?
- How was a sense of space or depth created?

## M – Memorize

Memorize the artist, time period, and facts about the artwork/technique.

## E – Express

Express your thoughts and ideas about the art.

You can also express by trying the technique of relief sculpture on your own. Ghiberti's relief sculptures were created by casting molten bronze metal into a mold. So, you won't be able to do that... However, there are several ways to create a simple relief sculpture:

- Make a clay slab and carve an image into it.
- Cut out cardboard and layer it on a panel. (You could also apply aluminum foil over top of this method for the aged, metallic look.)
- Build up texture on a piece of cardboard, and then cover it with aluminum foil to look like a metal relief sculpture. For this popular method: First, draw a design with Elmer's glue on cardboard and let it dry. Then, generously apply a glue stick to the cardboard, and put the foil over top. Once the foil is glued on, you can draw designs into the foil with a dull pencil. And finally, apply India ink to create an aged look.



Relief carved into clay



Cardboard collage relief sculpture



Aluminum foil relief

## S – Story telling

Tell the story about this work of art. (Story is after these images)

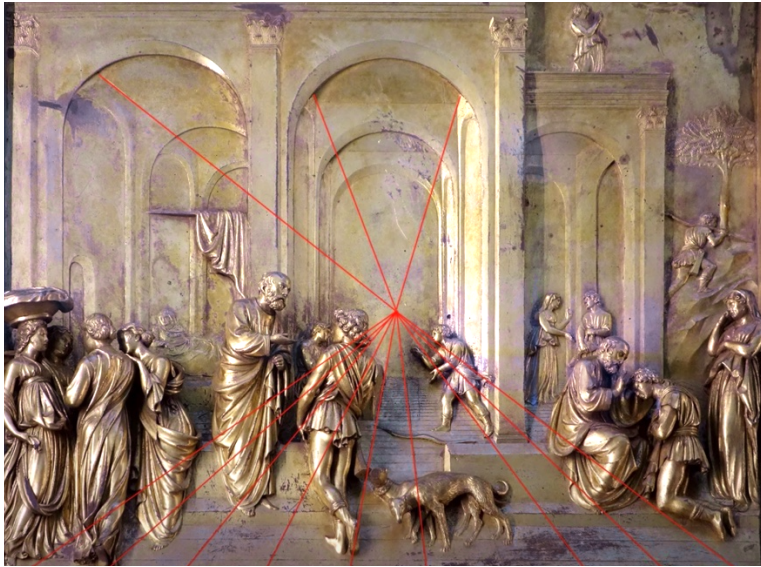
For context, here are a few more images. This is the baptistry of San Giovanni. The baptistry is part of this large church where citizens of Florence would be baptized.



Here are the doors. The people here can give you a sense of how large these doors are.



Ghiberti used linear perspective (a Renaissance invention) as seen with the floor tiles. The lines are all angled to recede back in space to a single vanishing point. This creates the illusion of a three-dimensional space for him to place his figures within. Here you can see how all of the receding lines of the floor tiles go back to the vanishing point (one-point linear perspective).



The architectural setting has a classical, Renaissance feeling with the arches and columns. Ghiberti changed the depth of the figures in the relief to add to the sense of space. The figures in the foreground are larger in size and they also have a higher or deeper relief - meaning they are more sculptural/three-dimensional and project more from the background. As the figures go back in space, they become smaller in size/scale, making them appear to be farther away. They also become flatter and less three-dimensional as they go back in space.



In this panel, Jacob obtains the birthright of his elder brother, Esau, and the blessing of their father, Isaac, thus becoming the founder of the Israelites. The story is shown in seven parts of the panel:

- 1- It begins in the upper right, on top of the building, where God appears to Rebekah. She is pregnant and asks God why there is so much turmoil in her womb.  
Gen. 25: 22-23: The babies jostled each other within her, and she said, "Why is this happening to me?" So she went to inquire of the Lord. The Lord said to her, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger."
- 2- The next scene is Rebekah giving birth to the twins in the background under the arch on the left
- 3- Next, Esau comes back from hunting – in the center arch. He comes back very hungry and asks his brother for some soup that he had made. Jacob says that he will give him some soup if he will give him his birthrights. So, Esau sells his rights as firstborn (his inheritance) to his twin brother Jacob in exchange for some soup.
- 4- In the center front (left of the dogs), Isaac sends Esau out to go hunting. (Esau was his favorite son and loved his cooking). Isaac tells Esau that he will give him his blessing when he gets back from hunting.
- 5- On the very right, Esau heads out to go hunting (by the tree).
- 6- Inside of the arch on the right, Rebekah reveals her plan for Jacob to receive the blessing of their father. She tells Jacob to get goats and bring them to her while Esau is out hunting. Meanwhile, she will make the soup for Jacob to take to Isaac. And then he can trick Isaac into giving him the blessing.
- 7- In the right foreground: Jacob, pretending to be Esau, kneels before the blind Isaac, who, feeling a hairy goatskin on Jacob's back, believes him to be Esau and mistakenly gives him the blessing. Rebekah and Jacob tricked Isaac into blessing the wrong son.