



The Best of the Best

The Musée du Louvre is the world's largest and oldest museum. It houses famous works of art such as The Mona Lisa, Winged Victory, Venus de Milo, and countless world-famous paintings dating up to the mid-1800s. It is overwhelming, crowded, and impossible to see everything in one visit. Over the years, I've developed a route for visiting what I deem to be the "best of the best" the Louvre has to offer. Your Exploring Europe guide will get you to the Louvre and through ticketing.

After ticket inspection go straight to the moat in the medieval section of the Louvre.

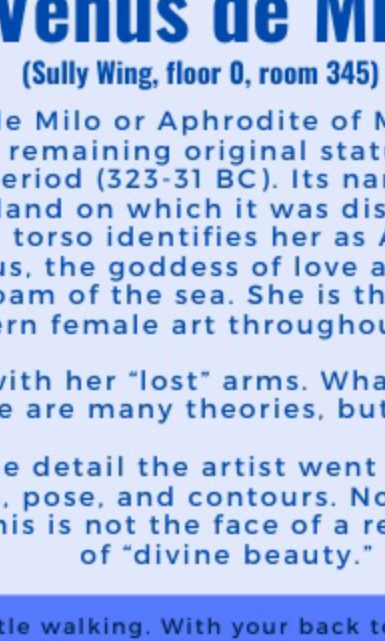
Medieval Walls

(Sully Wing, floor -1, room 135)

Around 1200, King Phillip Augustus of France ordered a fortress to be built outside the walls of Paris. He ordered this because he feared an English invasion from Normandy. This fortified castle did not become a part of the royal palace until the fourteenth century under the reign of Charles V. Later, in 1515, King Francis I visited Italy and returned to Paris with the idea to build a grand Renaissance palace. Everything except what you see here was razed to the ground and construction began on the new palace. The moat that you see was filled in and a courtyard was built above. It wasn't until the construction of the glass pyramid in 1983-85 that this moat was discovered. It has been open to the public since 1989.



Find the staircase that has an Egyptian Sphinx at the top. Walk up the stairs. On your way up notice the carvings made by 14th-century stonemasons. Hearts, hooks, crosses and triangles.



The Great Sphinx of Tanis

(Sully Wing, floor -1, room 338)

The Great Sphinx of Tanis comes from Egypt's Old Kingdom (about 2600 BC). It is carved out of a solid chunk of granite and weighs about 24 tons. The Sphinx combines the images of a lion (a powerful animal and a solar symbol) with that of the king noted by the head cloth, false beard, protective cobras, and the name written on the cartouche. The name "Sphinx" although Greek in origin, is derived from an ancient Egyptian term "shesep-ankh" meaning "living image."

Turn your back to the Sphinx, and face the moat. Take the staircase on your left.

Venus de Milo

(Sully Wing, floor 0, room 345)

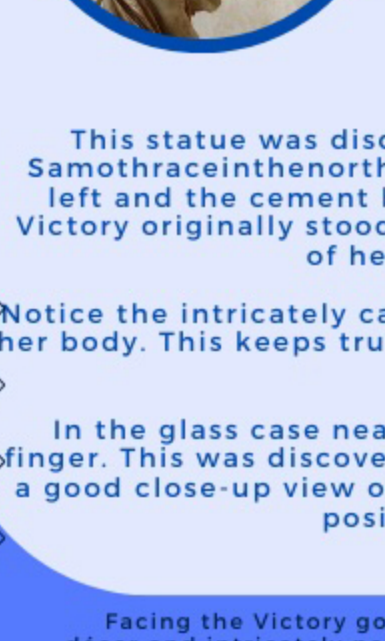
The Venus de Milo or Aphrodite of Melos is one of a very few remaining original statues from the Hellenistic period (323-31 BC). Its name is taken from the Greek island on which it was discovered in 1820. Her naked torso identifies her as Aphrodite, the Roman Venus, the goddess of love and beauty, born from the foam of the sea. She is the model for all Western female art throughout history.



Imagine her with her "lost" arms. What do you think she would be doing with them? There are many theories, but yours is just as good as any expert's!

Notice the detail the artist went to in carving her torso. The perfect proportions, pose, and contours. Now take a look at her face. It is almost "mask-like." This is not the face of a real woman, it is the classic Greek profile of "divine beauty." (height 80.25 inches)

Get ready to do a little walking. With your back to Venus de Milo cross the gallery ahead of you. Go past the Caryatids room on your right and cross the rotunda. Go up two flights of stairs to the foot of the Victory of Samothrace staircase.



Winged Victory

(Denon Wing, floor 1, room 703)

The Winged Victory of Samothrace is an original Greek statue believed to date from 190 BC. Originally, it stood on a prominent seaside hilltop to commemorate a great Naval victory. For centuries she bid welcome to all who arrived at the island of Samothrace. The Victory, or Nike in Greek, is a mythical character and is shown just as she is alighting on the prow of a ship to which she is bringing divine favor. Scholars believe her arms originally were stretched above her head providing a counterbalance as she gracefully descended to the prow of a ship.

This statue was discovered, in countless pieces, in 1865 off the island of Samothrace in the northeast Aegean Sea. The right wing is a plaster copy of the left and the cement base beneath its feet is also modern. As noted earlier, Victory originally stood on the carved prow of a ship. That, along with the rest of her missing parts are still undiscovered.

Notice the intricately carved detail of the wet and wind-blown drapery covering her body. This keeps true to the Hellenistic art style of depicting realism in their art.

In the glass case nearby you will find her right hand with an outstretched finger. This was discovered by the French in 1950 in present-day Turkey. It gives a good close-up view of the intricately carved detail, as well as suggesting the position of her arms. (height: 129 inches)

Facing the Victory go to the left, up a few steps, and find a circular room. Notice the rich decor and intricately painted ceiling. Take a look out the window toward the glass pyramid.

Room with a View

The Louvre, originally the palace for the kings and queens of France, was constructed over a period of eight centuries. In the Sully Wing, over to the right, you've seen the earliest structure of the Moat and ancient fortifications. Far to your left, beyond the pyramid and the triumphal arch, was another palace known as the Tuileries. King after king constructed additions to the Louvre and Tuileries palace wings until they finally connected in 1852. After three centuries of "remodeling," France finally had the largest building in the world! Unfortunately, in 1871 the Tuileries burnt to the ground during a riot leaving the Louvre as we see it today.



Notice the plaque at the base of the dome. It explains that the French Revolutionary National Assembly de commissioned the Louvre as a palace and founded this museum in 1793.

Face away from the windows and enter the richly decorated Apollon Gallery.



Apollon Gallery

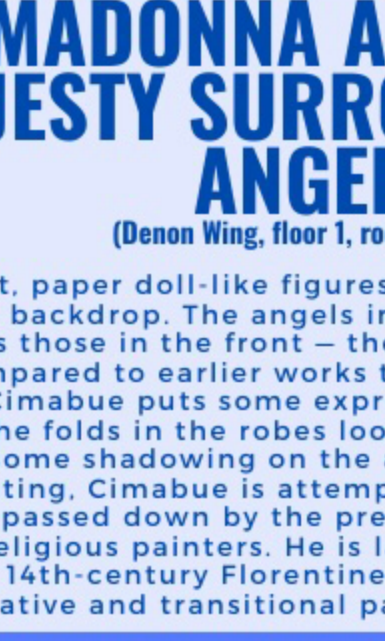
(Denon Wing, floor 1, room 705)

Here you can get a taste of the over-indulgence of the French monarchy. Notice the gold leaf decorations, the ornate stucco, and the intricately woven tapestries. It was from here that the kings of France ruled for two centuries. Walk to the end of the room and find, enclosed in a glass case, the French Crown Jewels. You'll see the jewel-studded crown of Louis XV and the 140-carat Regent Diamond which once graced the crowns of Louis XV, Louis XVI, and Napoleon.

Change of Pace

Now let's look at something totally different. Up to now, you've seen the Moat and Fortress dating from the Middle Ages and the greatest works from the Hellenistic period in Greece. Now let's explore how the Italians dug themselves out of the dirt, dung, and decay of the Middle Ages and led the re-birth of Classical Greek and Roman art in the 15th century.

Exit the Apollon Gallery and backtrack to the Winged Victory. Walk down the stairs, in front of the Winged Victory, and up the stairs on the other side. Go into Salle 1 and notice the frescoes on the left.



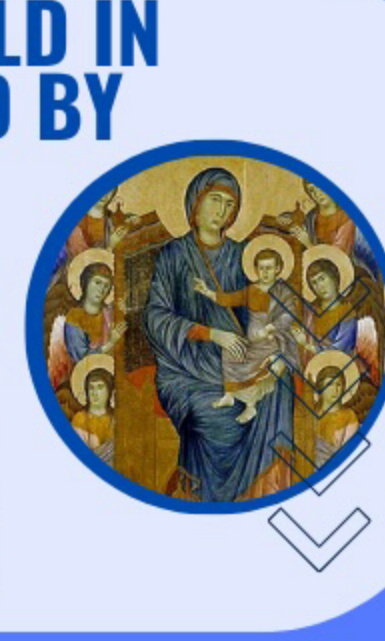
VENUS AND THE THREE GRACES

(Denon Wing, floor 1, room 706)

This fresco of Venus and the Three Graces Presenting Gifts to a Young Woman is from a villa near Florence, Italy. It most likely was commissioned as a wedding gift to a family member. Botticelli, a native of Florence, produced this fresco between 1483 and 1485. Compare this to the medieval paintings you'll see in the next room. There is a lot more detail, depth, perception, and realism here.

Fresco is an Italian word meaning "fresh." Frescoes were normally composed on walls or ceilings. It involves mixing colored pigments with plaster and applying it "fresh" and wet on the wall surface. When it dries, you have a wall mural of plaster.

Walk into the next room, and look to the left at the big painting of Mary and Jesus with the gold background.



THE MADONNA AND CHILD IN MAJESTY SURROUNDED BY ANGELS

(Denon Wing, floor 1, room 707)

Notice the flat, paper doll-like figures, painted flat against a gold backdrop. The angels in the back are the same size as those in the foreground – there is no depth. However, compared to earlier works there is some reality here. Cimabue puts some expression on the virgin's face, the folds in the robes look natural, and there is even some shadowing on the angel's wings. With this painting, Cimabue is attempting to break the constraints passed down by the previous thousand years of religious painters. He is laying the groundwork for 14th-century Florentine art and that of another innovative and transitional painter, Giotto.

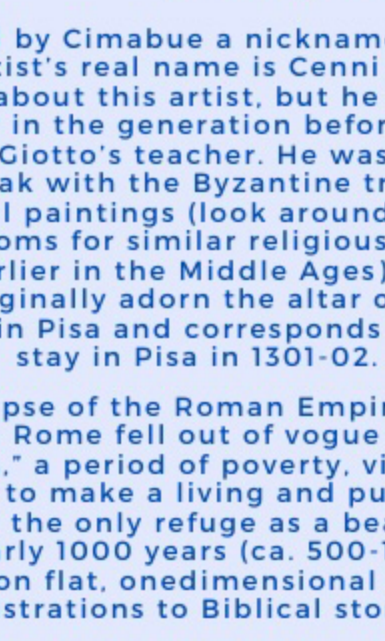
Art of the "Dark Ages"

The Madonna and Child in Majesty Surrounded by Angels is by Cimabue a nickname meaning "Ox-head." The artist's real name is Cenni di Peppi. Very little is known about this artist, but he was the leading Italian painter in the generation before Giotto. Some believe he was Giotto's teacher. He was the first Italian painter to break with the Byzantine tradition of flat, one-dimensional paintings (look around in this and the surrounding rooms for similar religious paintings done 100 years earlier in the Middle Ages). This work is believed to originally adorn the altar of the church of San Francesco in Pisa and corresponds with Cimabue's stay in Pisa in 1301-02.

After the collapse of the Roman Empire (492 AD) it seems that the great art from Greece and Rome fell out of vogue and was forgotten. Europe entered into the "Dark Ages," a period of poverty, violence, and plagues. It was all people could do just to make a living and put a roof over their heads. The Church seemed to offer the only refuge as a beacon of hope and salvation. During this period of nearly 1000 years (ca. 500-1450 AD) European artists seemed to concentrate on flat, one-dimensional practical religious art that served as illustrations of Biblical stories and points of worship.

During the Middle Ages, almost every church in Europe had a painting such as this that adorned the altar. Mary was, and is, a central figure in the life of the Church. She is prayed to and adored as the one who brought Jesus into the world. Altarpieces like this one followed the same painting scheme: somber iconic faces, stiff poses, frilly folds in the robes, and, of course, Mary, Baby Jesus, and identical-looking angels.

Turn around. On the opposite wall is a painting of a monk getting laser shots from an angel.



ST. FRANCIS RECEIVING THE STIGMATA

(Denon Wing, floor 1, room 707)

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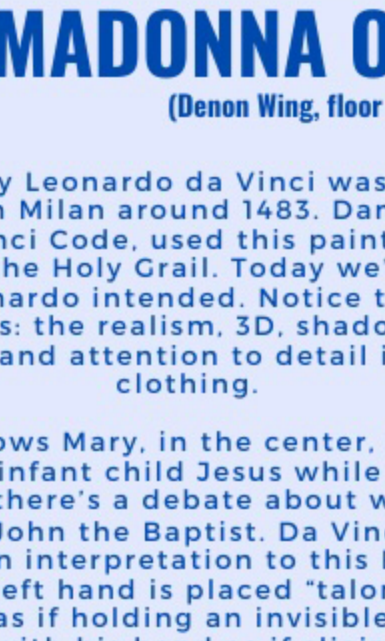
Enter the Grand Gallery, the longest hallway of art in the world. Here you will be flooded with Italian art of the Renaissance period (1450-1600). Notice how the elementary efforts of Cimabue and Giotto have been fully developed by the artists of this era. Take some time here and browse to your heart's content. The next stop is in front of several paintings by Leonardo da Vinci, about one-fourth of the way down the gallery on the left.

David's Quick Guide to the Renaissance

Renaissance means "rebirth." This idea originated from the 14th-century Italian poet named Petrarch. He divided history into ages: the golden age of classical antiquity (Greece and Rome); the dark ages after the Roman Empire; and his modern age, when the values of antiquity were "reborn." Florence is often described as the "cradle of the Renaissance" because there was a remarkable group of artists who brought about this "rebirth" of the classical Greek and Roman arts.

The Renaissance also saw a rise in the middle class. In Florence, the economy flourished. By 1400 merchants and bankers were the most powerful citizens of the Italian city-states. Unlike the former aristocrats who inherited their wealth and position, the new middle class achieved their status by themselves. From about 1434 Florence was ruled by the powerful banking family, the Medicis. They were keenly interested in art and architecture and hired many of the most famous Florentine Renaissance artists to work for them.

The Renaissance changed people's thinking, not only about art but about every aspect of life. In politics there was democracy; in religion, there was a shift from Church dominance to humanism (more emphasis on man). Science, poetry, and literature were revived after being oppressed for 1000 years in the Middle Ages. In architecture, the Renaissance meant a return to the balance and symmetry of ancient Greece and Rome. In painting the Renaissance meant REALISM (real people doing real things in the living, visible world) and this was most evident in the artistic devices of three-dimensionality and perspective. Finally, artists rediscovered the beauty of nature and the human body and had no restrictions placed on their artistic endeavors.



MADONNA OF THE ROCK

(Denon Wing, floor 1, room 710)

This painting, by Leonardo da Vinci, was commissioned for a church in Milan around 1483. Dan Brown in his book, The Da Vinci Code, used this painting as a clue in the search for the Holy Grail. Today we'll focus on the painting as Leonardo intended. Notice the Renaissance characteristics: the realism, 3D, shadows and light, depth, balance, and attention to detail in the faces and clothing.

The painting shows Mary, in the center, sitting with her arm around the infant child Jesus while archangel Uriel or Gabriel (there's a debate about who this is) sits with little John the Baptist. Da Vinci put his own twist on the painting by adding his own interpretation to this Biblical scene. Notice John is blessing Jesus. Mary's left hand is placed "talon-like" in a threatening gesture above John's head as if holding an invisible head. Finally, the angel is making a cutting gesture with his hand as if slicing the neck of the invisible head held by Mary's talon-like hand.

The folks at the church in Milan reacted in horror when Da Vinci presented them with this painting. It never hung in the church! In fact, Da Vinci painted another, less controversial version for the church. It is called VIRGIN OF THE ROCKS and is on display in London's National Gallery.

Regardless of the iconic controversy, this is still a masterpiece of the Renaissance. Look at the other DaVinci's nearby: Virgin, Child and St. Anne (1510) and John the Baptist.

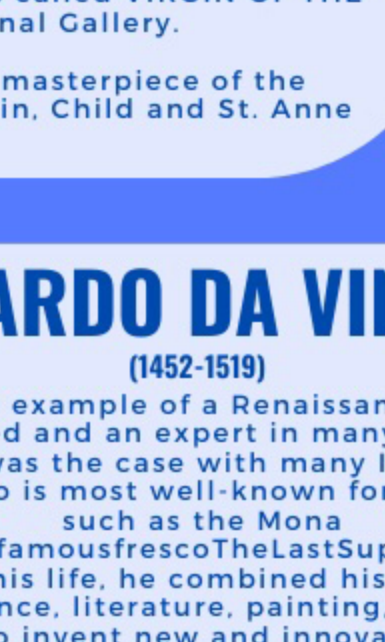


LEONARDO DA VINCI

(1452-1519)

was a perfect example of a Renaissance man, being well-educated and an expert in many subjects and fields. This was the case with many Italians in this era. Leonardo is most well-known for his paintings such as the Mona Lisa. Throughout his life, he combined his knowledge of math, science, literature, painting, music, and engineering to invent new and innovative things. His sketchbooks contain the classic Vitruvian Man, showing an anatomically correct "perfect Renaissance man," functional sketches of a helicopter, a solar-powered generator, and a military tank. Leonardo was a genius who helped turn the world around by pulling mankind out of the Dark Ages into a rebirth of education, thought, art, and humanity.

Walk just a few steps farther down the Grand Gallery where you find the entrance to the room Salle des Etats. Go in and join the crowd.



MONA LISA (LA JOCONDE)

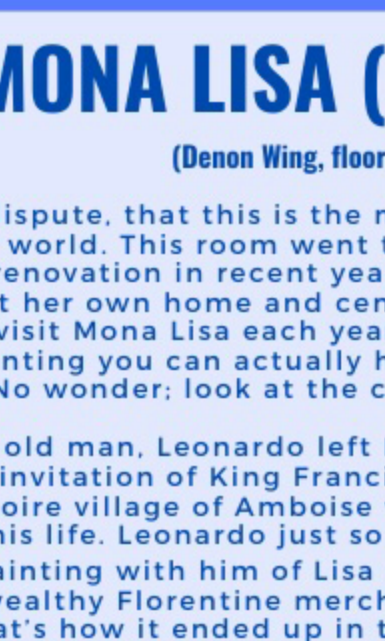
(Denon Wing, floor 1, room 711)

There is no dispute, that this is the most famous painting in the world. This room went through a five-million-euro renovation in recent years and finally "Mona" has got her own home and center stage. Six million people visit Mona Lisa each year and many say it's the only painting you can actually hear before you see it. No wonder; look at the crowds.

When he was an old man, Leonardo left Italy and moved to France at the invitation of King Francis I. The king set him up in the Loire village of Amboise where he lived the rest of his life. Leonardo just so happened to bring a painting with him of Lisa Gherardini, wife of Francesco del Giocondo, a wealthy Florentine merchant. The king fell in love with this portrait and that's how it ended up in the Louvre. La Joconde (in French) is now known worldwide as the Mona Lisa.

Her face is seen in frontal view, the bust in three-quarter view and the hands crossed gracefully in the foreground. Leonardo did not merely paint a portrait, he brought her to life with those amusing eyes gazing down at all of us and the enigmatic smile adding further mystery to the scene. Leonardo used a technique called sfumato to have the edges of Mona's lips blend into the flesh tones of her face. No matter how hard you try, you can never see the edges of her mouth. Is she happy, sad, content, or just smirking at us all? That's the mystery!

Turn around and look at the huge painting on the wall behind you.



THE WEDDING FEAST AT CANA (1563)

(Denon Wing, floor 1, room 711)

Veronese was a Renaissance artist who lived most of his life in northern Italy. From about 1553 onwards he was employed in Venice where he was given mostly free rein to paint and decorate palaces, public places, and churches on the island.

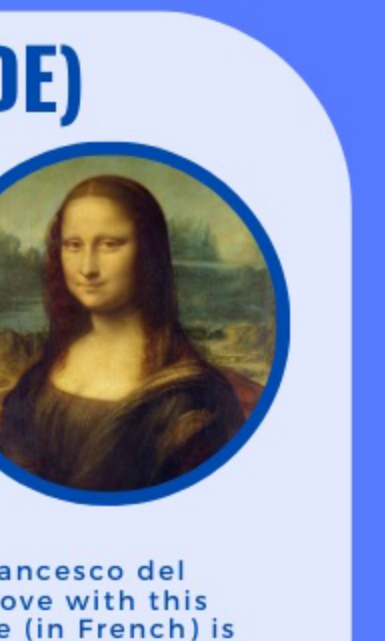
This painting depicts the Biblical event where Jesus turned water into wine at a wedding feast. Veronese paints this in a contemporary Venetian setting complete with classical architecture, guests in contemporary clothing, and authentic Renaissance musicians all realistically portrayed. Veronese's approach to religious scenes was normally light-hearted and celebratory rather than staunch and stiff.

Take a look at the wedding couple at the far left (the groom is in red and blue, the bride is in white). They appear to be the only ones not enjoying the party! Perhaps they are miffed at not being the center of attention. Now notice the celebration. Musicians play in an intimate style. The man down front samples the wine and thinks, "That's pretty good stuff considering it was water just moments ago." Dogs and cats are scattered about waiting for scraps to be dropped on the floor.

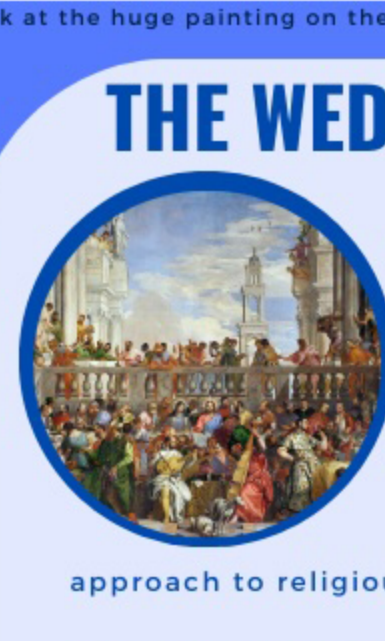
Let's not forget Jesus; he's there in the middle of the one hundred and thirty or so people pensively looking on and perhaps considering this, his first miracle and its implications on humanity.

Veronese also included portraits of some of his contemporaries in the painting. Check out the orchestra, on the base is Titian, another famous artist from Venice. Finally, the guy on the viola is Veronese himself, all decked out in white and entertaining the crowd.

Turn around and exit this room by walking around behind the Mona Lisa. You'll be leaving the Italians and entering the Salle Denon. The grand Romantic room is to your left and the dramatic neo-Classical room is to your right. Here you will find some of the most famous masterpieces by French artists.



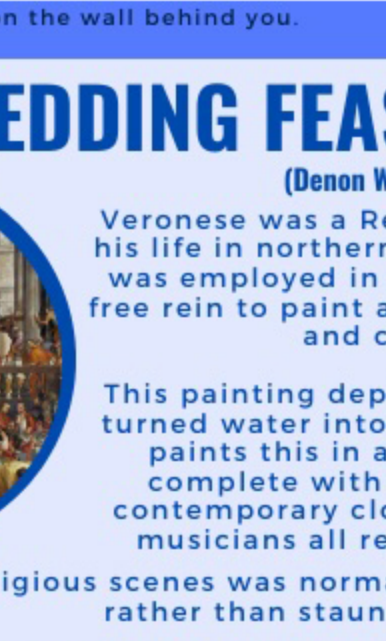
French Masterpieces



Turn around back through the Salle Denon and enter the Romantic room. Find the large painting of men on a raft

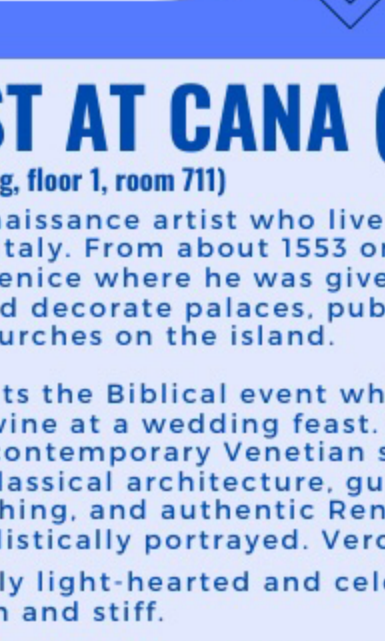
(room 702)

Take a quick look in the room to your right and find the largest canvas in the Louvre. The Coronation of Emperor Napoleon I by Jacques-Louis David.



The Raft of Medusa (1818), by Théodore Géricault, is an icon of French Romanticism.

(room 700)



Liberty Leading the People (1831), by Eugène Delacroix, inspired by the Paris uprising in 1830.

(room 700)

You Did it!

This ends the tour. Continue on through the Romantic room to the stairs and the café. Go down the stairs. Notice the famous SLAVES carved by Michelangelo, another Florentine Renaissance master. Follow the signs back to the pyramid, collect your bags if necessary, and breathe a sigh of relief after completing your whirlwind tour of the Louvre.