

Mural painting has its roots in the primeval instincts of people to decorate their surroundings and to use [wall](#) surfaces as a form for expressing ideas, emotions, and beliefs. In their universal [manifestation](#) in [graffiti](#) and in ancient murals, such as cave paintings and protodynastic Egyptian frescoes, symbols and representational images have been spread freely and indiscriminately across walls, ceilings, and floors. But, in more [disciplined](#) attempts to symbolize the importance and function of particular buildings through their [interior decoration](#), murals have been designed for the restricted framework of specific surface areas. They therefore have to be painted in close relationship to the scale, style, and mood of the interior and with regard to such siting considerations as light sources, eye levels, the spectators' lines of sight and means of approach, and the emotive scale relationship between spectators and the painted images.



**Murals in the Tomb of Sennedjem** Murals depicting scenes from the afterlife, in the Tomb of Sennedjem, Thebes, Egypt. *Sylvain Grandadam/age fotostock*

Early mural decorations for tombs, temples, sanctuaries, and catacombs were generally designed in horizontal divisions and vertical axes. These grid patterns were in [harmony](#) with

the austere character of the interiors, and their geometrical plan enabled the artist to depict clearly the various episodes and symbols of a narrative subject. In these early traditions of mural design, in [China](#), India, [Mexico](#), Egypt, Crete, and Byzantium, no illusionary devices were used to deny the true flatness of the wall surface; images were silhouetted against a flatly painted ground framed by decorative dadoes (the decoration adorning the lower part of an interior wall) of stylized motifs in repeat patterns. By the early [Renaissance](#), however, innovators such as [Giotto](#), [Masaccio](#), and [Fra Angelico](#) were placing figures within architectural and landscape settings, painted as if extensions to the real dimensions of the interior. The peak of technical skill and artistic expression was reached in the 15th and 16th centuries with the frescoes of [Piero della Francesca](#), [Michelangelo](#), and [Raphael](#). The irregular shapes of wall areas and the distortions produced by convex surfaces were inventively exploited in the design. Intruding doors and windows, for example, were skillfully circumvented by sweeping pattern rhythms or were incorporated as features in the painting, and figures were foreshortened so as to appear to float across or to rise into cupolas (rounded vaults that form ceilings), lunettes (rounded spaces over doors or windows), and apses (domed projections of a church, usually at the east end or altar), the curving surfaces of which might be painted to simulate celestial skies. Existing structural wall features provided the divisions between narrative episodes. These were often supplemented by [trompe l'oeil](#) ("deceive the eye") columns, pilasters, arcading, balustrading, steps, and other architectural forms that also served to fuse the painted setting with the real interior.

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Concepts & Terms

2<sup>nd</sup> stage

9<sup>th</sup> lecture



*The Annunciation*, fresco by Fra Angelico, 1438-45; in the Museum of San Marco, Florence. SCALA/Art Resource, New York