



"These pictures are all the more amazing as nobody had ever created anything similar."

Gregorio Comanini, *Il Figino*, 1591

1 Peculiar Portraits

Giuseppe Arcimboldo (1526–1593) was born into a family of painters in the northern Italian city of Milan. The city was considered the cradle of naturalism, a mode of artistic expression based on the direct observation of nature. This approach to art was shaped by Leonardo da Vinci, whose work Arcimboldo likely studied in Milan.

In 1563, at the age of thirty-six, Arcimboldo left Italy to work in the imperial courts of the Habsburg rulers, first for Maximilian II in Vienna and then for Rudolf II in Prague. He served as court painter for twenty-five years, creating portraits of the imperial family. Like other artists of his time, he designed tapestries and stained glass windows, and created theater costumes for the elaborate festivals and masquerades he organized at the court. However, Arcimboldo remains best known for the highly original "portraits" he composed by imaginatively arranging objects, plants, animals, and other elements of nature.

To celebrate the reign of Emperor Maximilian II, Arcimboldo presented two series of composite heads: *The Seasons* and *The Elements*. In *The Seasons* (*Spring, Summer, Autumn, and Winter*), created in 1563, Arcimboldo combined plants associated with a particular season to form a portrait of that time of year. The series was extremely popular in the Habsburg court, and Arcimboldo reproduced it several times so the emperor could send versions to friends and important political figures. Three years later he completed a series on the four elements (*Earth, Air, Fire, and Water*). Arcimboldo also made witty composite portraits of different professions, such as a librarian, jurist, cook, and vegetable gardener, using objects associated with each occupation. In these innovative works, Arcimboldo fills the paintings with dense details that come together harmoniously to create a human form.



2 When Art Meets Science

When Arcimboldo arrived at the court of Emperor Maximilian II, he found his new patron was passionately interested in the biological sciences of botany and zoology. The study of flora and fauna grew as a result of the voyages of exploration and discovery that were undertaken to the New World, Africa, and Asia in the sixteenth century. Explorers returned with exotic plants and animals that created an explosion of European interest in the study of nature. Maximilian transformed his court into a center of scientific study, bringing together scientists and philosophers from all over Europe. His botanical gardens and his zoological parks with elephants, lions, and tigers caused a sensation.

As court painter to the emperor, Arcimboldo had access to these vast collections of rare flora and fauna. His nature studies show his skill and precision as an illustrator and his knowledge as a naturalist—but Arcimboldo went beyond illustration by building fantastic faces out of the natural specimens he observed. His paintings not only demonstrate a unique fusion of art and science, but they also provide an encyclopedia of the plants and animals that Maximilian acquired for his botanical garden and menagerie.

Maximilian displayed Arcimboldo's paintings of the seasons and elements in his *Kunstkammer*, a special “art chamber” dedicated to his collections of marvelous and curious things. Along with works of art, he collected Greek and Roman antiquities, scientific instruments, precious gems, fossils, and interesting shells. Arcimboldo's paintings fit right in among the emperor's many prized possessions.

top left: Giuseppe Arcimboldo, *Water*, 1566, oil on limewood, © Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna, Austria

From *The Elements* series, this painting combines more than sixty different fish and aquatic animals.

bottom left: Giuseppe Arcimboldo, *The Librarian*, 1562, oil on canvas, Skoklosters Castle (photo: Samuel Uhrdin)

In this portrait of the court historian Wolfgang Lazius, the artist used an open book for his full head of hair, feather dusters for his beard, keys for his eyes, and bookmarks for his fingers.

right: Giuseppe Arcimboldo, *Four Seasons in One Head*, c. 1590, oil on panel, National Gallery of Art, Paul Mellon Fund



3 Four Seasons in One

Look closely at *Four Seasons in One Head*. A gnarled and knotty tree trunk creates the figure's head and chest, representing the winter season. Two holes in the trunk form the eyes, a broken branch serves as a nose, and moss and twigs are the beard. Spring flowers decorate the figure's chest. Summer is indicated by the cherries that form the ear, the plums at the back of the head, and the cloak of straw draped around the shoulders. Apples, grapes, and ivy, the fruit and plants of autumn, top the head. On a branch among the apples, Arcimboldo inscribed his name in the wood beneath the bark that has been stripped away: “ARCIMBOLDUS F” (F is for *fecit*, which means “made this” in Latin).

This is one of the last paintings that Arcimboldo created after he returned to Milan from the Habsburg court in 1587. Perhaps he considered it a self-portrait in the “winter” of his life, brooding over his bygone seasons.

Imagine that this portrait could talk. What stories might it tell?

try this

It's Seasonal!

Explore Arcimboldo's *The Seasons*. List at least five things the artist incorporated into the paintings to suggest each season. How does each painting remind you of a particular season?

Compare: How are the four paintings similar? How are they different?

Create a composite portrait of a season

You will need:

A cardboard, wood, or canvas surface

Clear-drying glue, such as PVA or Mod Podge

A brush

Collage materials – newspapers, magazines, decorative papers, stickers, etc.

Choose a season for the subject of your work. Collect collage materials that remind you of that season, such as twigs, leaves, and photographs of activities that you enjoy at that time of year.

Start by making an outline of a human profile on your board or canvas, indicating generally where the eyes, nose, ears, and mouth might be. This will serve as a guide as you arrange your collage materials.

Cut out and arrange parts for your collage. Experiment with overlapping pieces and turning them in various directions. Consider how different shapes can be combined to create a human head. Keep



in mind your color palette and how it can help communicate the mood or feel of the season. When arranging collage pieces, start with larger shapes to cover the area of the head, then use smaller pieces to create details and facial features.

Once you have arranged the collage elements, begin to glue them down. Brush glue on the underside to adhere to the board or canvas. When you are finished, brush a thin layer of glue on top of the entire work to prevent the edges from curling.

Try this again with a different subject. Consider choosing a profession, a school subject, or a holiday. You might even want to create a series, as Arcimboldo did.

top left: Giuseppe Arcimboldo, *Winter*, 1573, oil on canvas, Louvre, Paris, France (photo: Jean-Gilles Berizzi). Photo credit: Réunion Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, NY

top right: Giuseppe Arcimboldo, *Spring*, 1573, oil on canvas, Louvre, Paris, France (photo: Jean-Gilles Berizzi). Photo credit: Réunion Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, NY

bottom left: Giuseppe Arcimboldo, *Summer*, 1573, oil on canvas, Louvre, Paris, France (photo: Jean-Gilles Berizzi). Photo credit: Réunion Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, NY

bottom right: Giuseppe Arcimboldo, *Autumn*, 1573, oil on canvas, Louvre, Paris, France (photo: Gérard Blot). Photo credit: Réunion Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, NY