

2013 Higher Level Question 9

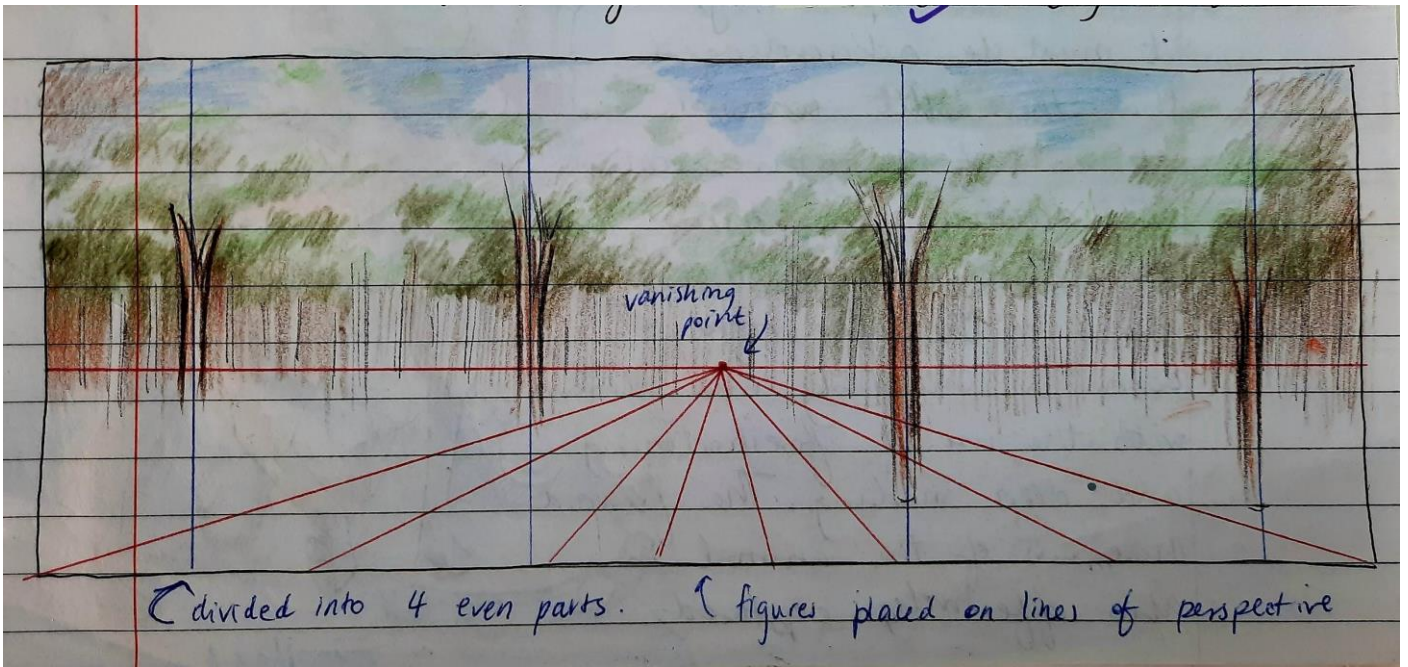
Paolo Uccello (1397 - 1475) was fascinated by the challenges and potential of perspective. Discuss this statement referring to “The Hunt in the Forest” which is illustrated on the accompanying sheet. Refer in your answer to perspective, subject matter, composition and the period in which it was produced. AND Discuss briefly how perspective was used in one other named painting from this period. Illustrate your answer.

Paolo Uccello lived in the early Renaissance period from 1397 - 1475. He trained as a sculptor in Ghiberti's workshop and later worked as a painter. During this time, mathematical perspective was discovered by the artist Brunelleschi which drastically influenced his works. Uccello became fascinated by the challenges and potential of perspective and it became a prominent feature of all his paintings. At times his obsession with mathematical accuracy controlled how he composed a piece and took away from the overall realism and natural flow.

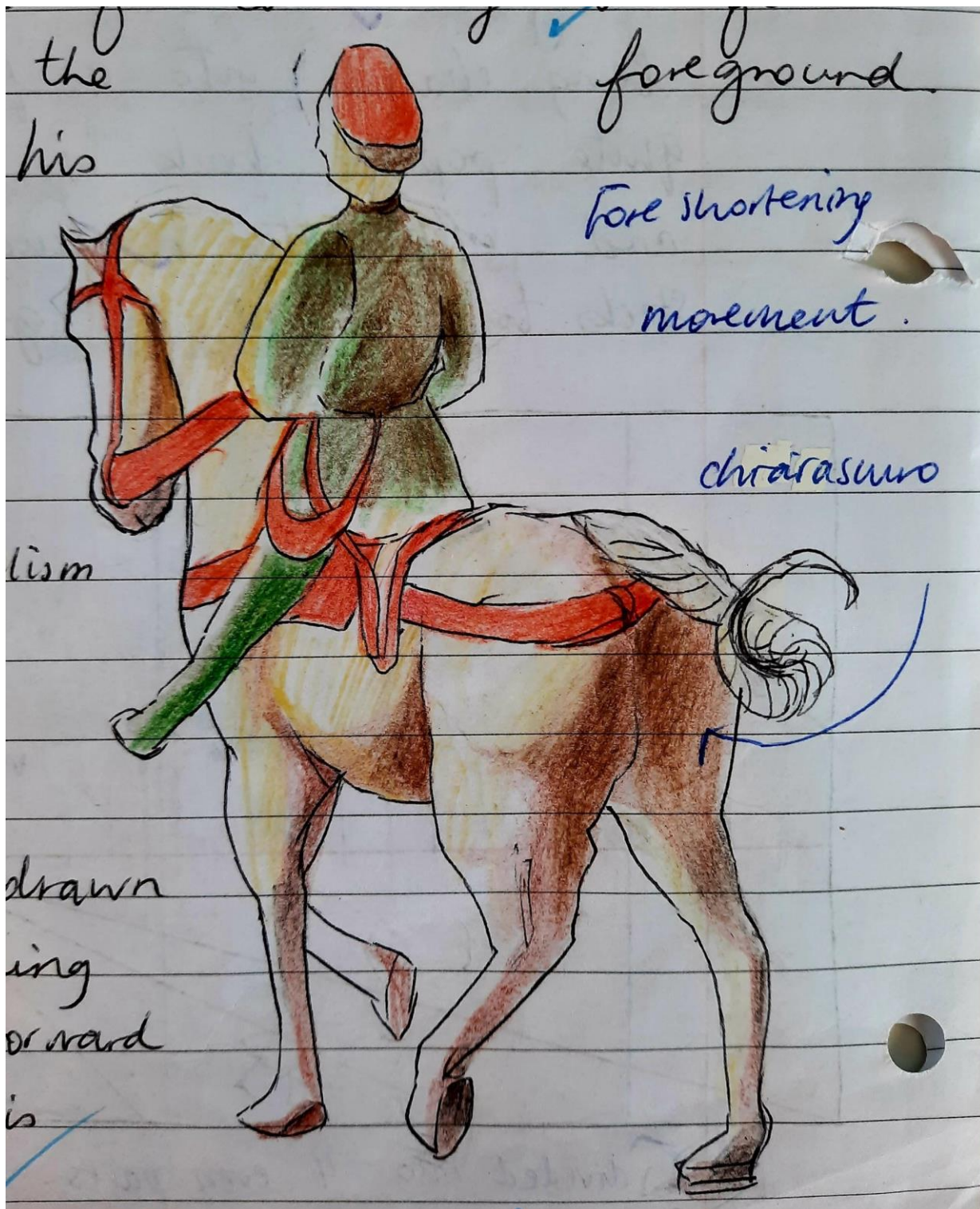
The Hunt in the Forest

Uccello's fascination with perspective can be seen in the painting “The Hunt in the Forest” which was completed around the 1460s. The impressive piece is 1.77m in width and 73 cm in height and was commissioned by the Strozzi Family, whose crest appears on the clothing of the figures throughout. The scene depicts a hunt, where a stag is being chased into a forest. This aristocratic past time was quite popular back in Florence during the early Renaissance period. It was often portrayed as a loud and joyous event with many carrying sticks to beat at the ground and others racing on horseback. Uccello tries to capture this raucous atmosphere and swift movement with wispy suggestions, seen in the shapes of the dogs and the postures of the moving figures. However, there remains an unnatural stiffness and lack of chaos in this painting.

The scene is placed directly on rigid lines of perspective with the vanishing point at the centre. The figures diminish mathematically as they recede into the distance. Each one is a fraction smaller than the preceding figures. The trees, horses, hounds and people are very carefully placed at regular intervals like a formulated pattern. This manufactured order and structure takes away from the supposedly disorganised atmosphere. Some figures also display a toy-like quality and many are not drawn with accurate proportions. Although the trees are painted with varying lengths and thicknesses to suggest depth, they are also neatly organised in a repeating pattern. In addition, the overall composition is framed by four evenly spaced out trees in the foreground.



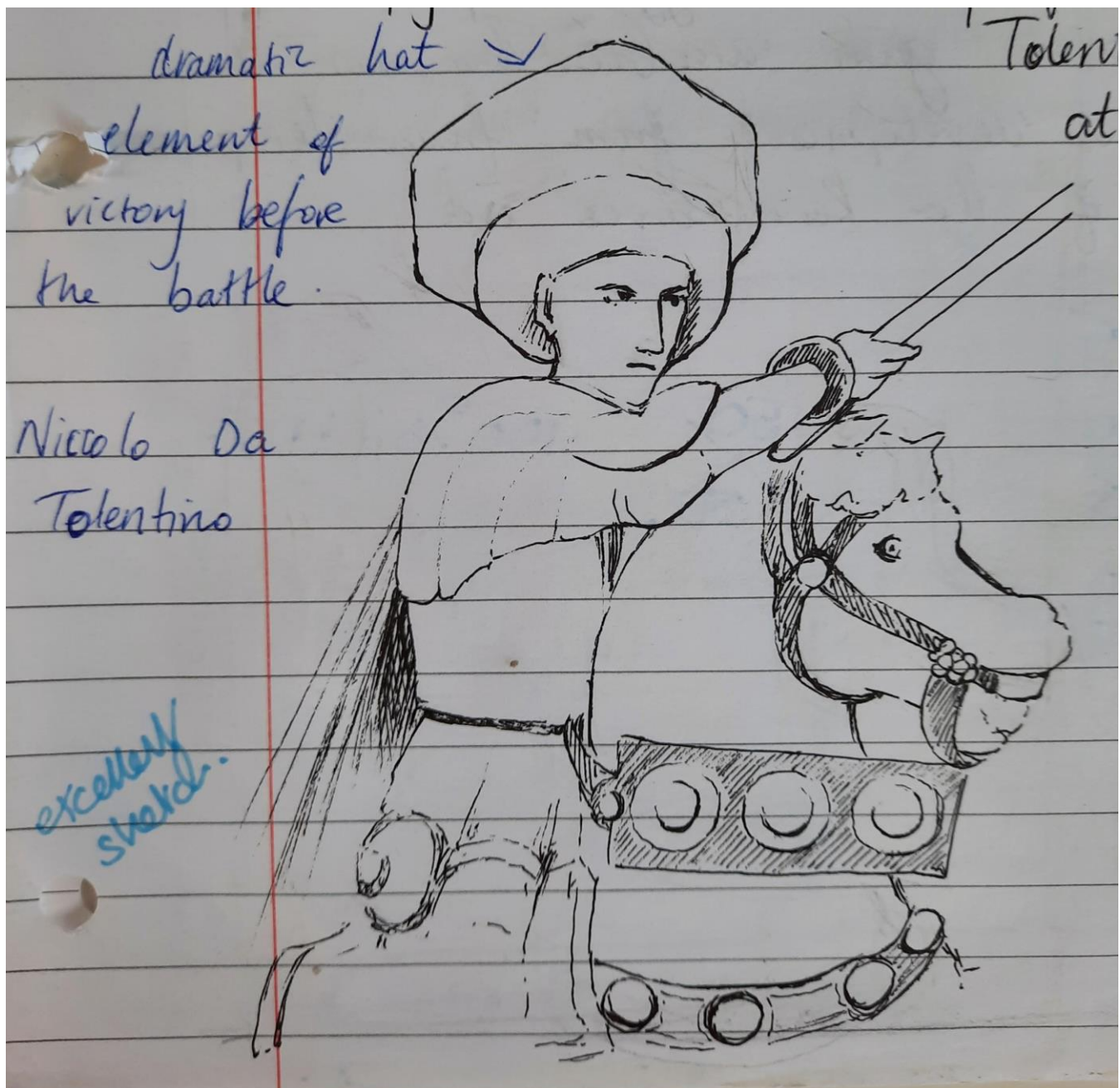
Even though Uccello allowed his obsession with perspective to dominate his paintings, it must be acknowledged that there are elements of impressive realism that showcase his artistic talent. For example, the horse on the far right corner is incredibly well drawn with the use of foreshortening and chiaroscuro. The forward movement of the animal is also effectively captured.

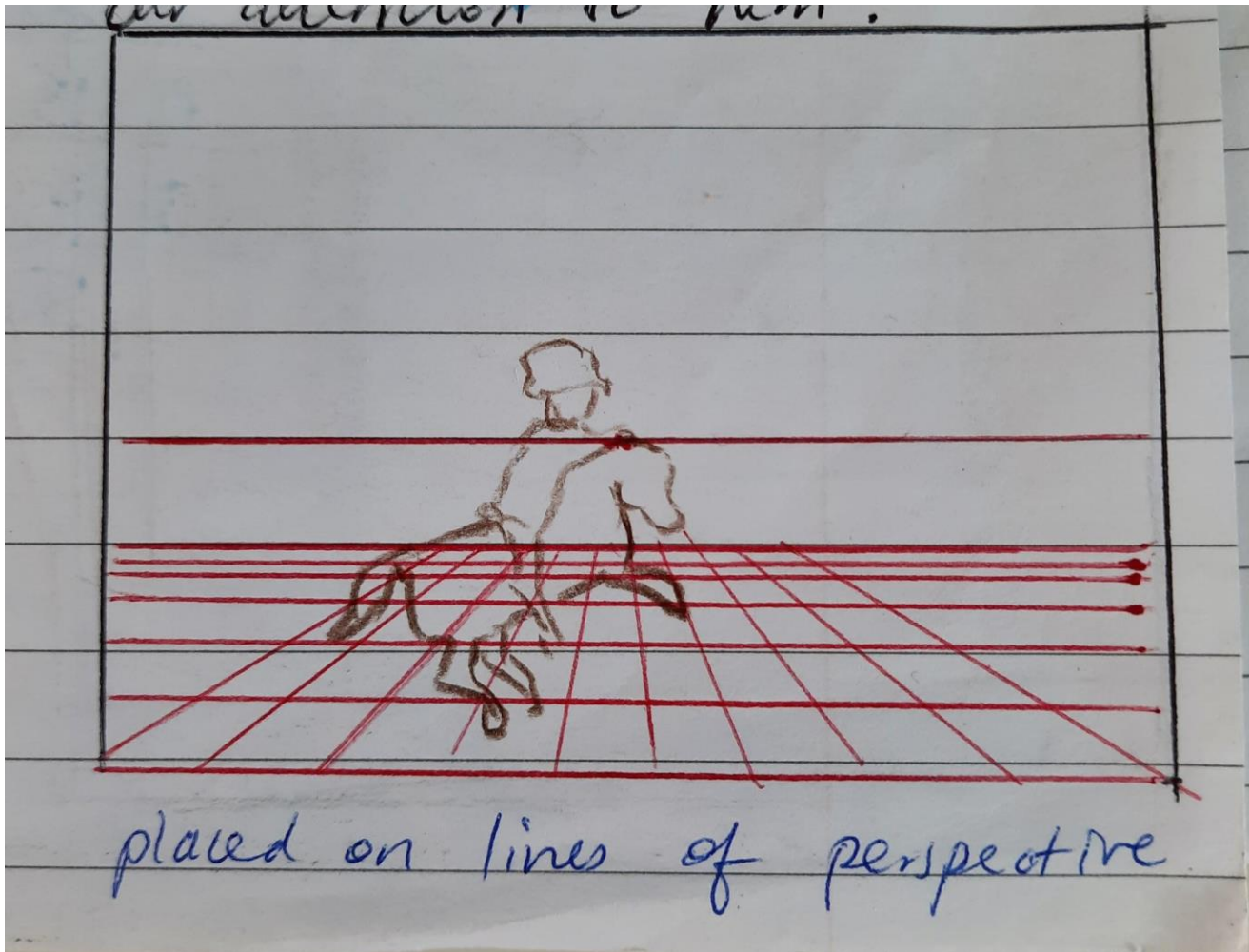


There is also great detail in the foliage of this painting. The carpet of grass and flowers has a similar appearance to Botticelli's "Primavera". Although the decorative gold has faded now, the leaves of the trees would have been once lined with gold leaf to produce a beautiful shimmering effect. The pattern of reds, greens and white contribute to the decorative tapestry look.

The Battle of San Romano

Another painting that displays Uccello's fascination with perspective is "The Battle of San Romano". This piece is part of a collection of three that was painted for the Medici family. The paintings are of a secular focus and depict the scene of a battle between the Florentines and the Siennese, in which the former won. The battle is captured with an emphasis on the decorative element rather than historical accuracy. The artist exaggerated the event to place the Medici family in a more favourable light. The figures are drawn on perspective lines with Nicola da Tolentino, the mercenary leader, at the vanishing point. Horses and lances are carefully placed on these perspective lines and draw our attention to him. He also supports a dramatic hat, hinting at the subsequent victory.





Uccello creates depth in the painting by making the figures significantly smaller in the background and larger in the foreground. The landscape does not contain a sky but it is speculated that there may be additional sections that have been cut away. The entire piece is composed of eight horizontal planks of poplar wood and painted with egg tempera mixed with walnut oil and gum arabic. This was the beginning of the development from fresco tempera to oil painting in the Renaissance era.

The overall composition has a theatrical feel to it. The horses appear stiff as if they are cut out of cardboard and lack realistic shading. The scattering of weapons is also composed rigidly along lines of perspective which takes away from the chaotic nature of a battle. On the bottom left-hand corner, we see a dead soldier who is known as "The Man Who Died for Perspective", since no historical documents record any deaths during the battle. The main reason Uccello includes him is so he can flaunt his skill of foreshortening. He draws the figure from a particularly difficult angle starting from his feet and working upwards. He challenges and pushes the boundaries of what could be achieved through perspective.

