

The rediscovery of the classical world

The study of Plato represented another major theory of the world. This in itself inevitably led to differences in opinion among the educated classes and encouraged freedom of thought. Plato believed that our knowledge of the world came not through the senses but through a type of reminiscence or memory of what he called **ideas**.

Everything that existed in nature corresponded to its 'idea', of which it was an **inferior but faithful copy**. Plato described our sensory experience of the world as being similar to that of people trapped in a **cave**, who can only see **the shadows of things** and not the things themselves in their essence. Plato says that the philosopher is the person who goes outside and sees things in **direct sunlight**. The sun is important for Plato as it represents the source of truth. For Plato it was vital to understand the essence of a thing, which he argued could only be done through the intellect. By comparing the available examples of a given object we could discern what elements were common to them all, which would give us a notion of the universal form. In this way, beauty, for example, is judged by Plato to be the perfect harmony of parts, the idea that Botticelli follows in painting his Venus.

Another crucial element in Plato's idea of knowledge is judgement. We must be able to judge true **essence** from false appearance. Writers of the Renaissance were deeply concerned with questions such as whether art could arrive at the essence of things and the relationship between appearance and truth. We see this clearly in the sonnet's explorations of themes such as love and beauty.

TIME IN MOTION

- 1 **Lab Use** the Internet to look for Book VII of Plato's *Republic*, where Plato explains his allegory of the cave.
 - a Summarise it in your own words or draw a sketch.
 - b What contemporary examples can you find of Plato's idea of being trapped in an illusory shadow world?

