

1 – THE RENAISSANCE (c. 1350 – c. 1550)

OVERVIEW

The word Renaissance literally means rebirth. To many Italians in the years between 1350 and 1550, it seemed like they were living in a time of rebirth. Many scholars and artists believed that they were living in a time when, after a thousand years of no progress, the cultures of classical Greece and Rome were being reborn after the intellectually and culturally stagnant Middle Ages. Fourteenth- and fifteenth-century intellectuals looked back at the Middle Ages, the period of time between the fall of the Roman Empire and the late fourteenth century, with much disdain and contempt. They viewed the Middle Ages as a dark period of history in which man showed little creativity, productivity, or civility. The Renaissance, as they saw it, was a new period in history that appeared to be in stark contrast to the Middle Ages.

Historians have put to rest the notion that the Middle Ages were as the Renaissance scholars described. In fact, Europe, in the thousand years before the Renaissance, did indeed produce art, architecture, literature, and other intellectual developments, contrary to the claims of Renaissance Italians. It would be unfair, though, to totally dismiss the Renaissance contemporaries' views of the Middle Ages and of their own times. The concept of rebirth does have some validity. During the late fourteenth century, Europe, and Italy in particular, was trying to recover from the devastating effects of the bubonic plague, or Black Death, which included widespread economic hardship and social and religious upheaval. With that in mind, it is much easier to understand how Renaissance thinkers proclaimed their era one of rebirth.

THE ITALIAN RENAISSANCE

The Renaissance was, however, if not a rebirth, at least a renewal or rediscovery of interest in and fascination with the cultures and values of classical Greece and Rome. The treasures of Greece and Rome had not been lost for a thousand years. Rather, the language and literature of these cultures had been carefully preserved in the monasteries of Europe by monks and scholars. Accompanying the revival of the classical cultures was a renewed interest in learning, which was fostered by the growth of universities. A new world view developed in the Renaissance, which was a view of marked contrast to that of Europeans during the Middle Ages. Finally, the Renaissance brought with it a new artistic movement influenced by and modeled after the art of Greece and Rome.

The Renaissance was largely an urban phenomenon. It was not by accident that the cities that gave rise to the Renaissance were Italian. During the Middle Ages, the towns of Italy began to develop their own identities and economies. Not owing allegiance to one nation or monarch, they developed into powerful, independent city-states that ruled the surrounding areas as well. These city-states, which had long been trade centers, grew into bustling urban areas driven by overseas trade, banking, and commerce. Venice, Genoa, Pisa, Naples, and Florence took advantage of their close proximity to the sea to market their goods such as wool, silk, and other products to countries in Asia and Europe. In addition, bankers in these cities made loans to monarchs and other power-hungry individuals across Europe. These commercial ventures sparked tremendous economic growth for the Italian states and gave rise to such powerful families as the Medici family of Florence, one of the most influential of all the Renaissance families.

From the continued economic success of the Italian states emerged a wealthy class of merchants and bankers who participated in, and many times even controlled, the politics of the city-states. The merchant class discovered the many material pleasures of life that their wealth could provide: fine fashion, fine art, and fine architecture. Therefore, the merchants and bankers of Italy became the patrons, or sponsors, of artists and designers of Italy. They called for these artists and architects to create artistic beauty simply to be appreciated and flaunted. The patrons demanded paintings and sculptures of themselves to be created so they and their wealth might be remembered for generations to follow. This was a break from the medieval tradition in which art was created for the higher purpose of the glorification of God. This new way of thinking ushered in the idea of secularism and began to chip away at the medieval notion of piety in all things, including art. It was these artists who spawned a new era in artistic achievement and are generally referred to as the Renaissance artists.

The newly created merchant class often found conflict with the nobility—those who owned land and whose wealth dated back many generations. In addition, each of these classes found themselves in conflict with the *popolo*, or the lower class that resented the wealth and power of the upper classes. These conflicts erupted in 1378 in Florence in the *Ciompi* revolt. The revolt brought about the establishment of a republican government in Florence and in Venice. In other states,

such as Milan, the conflicts led to rule by the signori, or tyrants. At the height of the Renaissance, Italy consisted of several major city-states that dominated the Renaissance era including the Republic of Florence, the Republic of Genoa, the Venetian Republic, the Duchy of Milan, the Papal states, and the Kingdom of Naples.

Out of the Italian Renaissance came a few schools of thought that had a profound effect on both Italian and European society for many years to follow. As mentioned before, the concept of secularism flourished during the Renaissance. This idea broke from the medieval tradition of having pious or religious motivations for doing things, whether it is creating art or reading and writing texts. Secularism grew out of the new, more materialistic view of the world by Renaissance society. Likewise, individualism broke with medieval tradition by placing importance and significance on the individual, on man. The celebration of the individual was an important aspect of the Renaissance.

Perhaps the defining concept of the Renaissance, one that developed out of individualism, is that of Humanism. Humanism can be defined in a number of ways; the focus on man, his potential, and his achievements is one definition. To some extent, this is part of Renaissance humanism. Perhaps the best way to define humanism within the context of the Renaissance is to say that it was the promotion of education and culture based on the classical models-Greek and Roman.

Often called the Father of Humanism, Francesco Petrarch (1304-1374) learned classical Latin (he already knew medieval Latin) and studied original classical texts by such authors as Cicero. Petrarch developed a following, particularly in Florence, of people who sought the wisdom of the classics on matters of government. These people became known as Civic Humanists. One such Civic Humanist, Leonardo Bruni (1370-1444), wrote a biography of Cicero called *New Cicero*. Through such literary works, the Civic Humanists used their powerful rhetoric to inspire humanists to become civic-minded and active in both political and cultural arenas. Soon, Civic Humanism spread to all parts of Italy.

Gradually, humanists began to develop an interest in Greek authors and texts, especially in Plato and his works. The study of Plato not only revived the study of both Greek language and scholarly works but also influenced many Renaissance philosophers. Much of Plato's work dealt with the idea of being and the idea that a truth exists beyond that which man can determine by using his senses alone. Plato pointed out, though, that man can discover this truth through the use of reason, which preexisted the physical world. Renaissance philosophers were fascinated by this concept. Renaissance scholars and philosophers echoed the

classical authors by also emphasizing man's amazing and almost unlimited potential. This concept is very well illustrated in Pico della Mirandola's (1463-1494) *Oration on the Dignity of Man*.

Humanism

Humanism had far-reaching effects throughout Italy and Europe. The church-influenced and Christian-dominated field of historiography, or the recording of history, changed completely with the advent of humanism. Humanism secularized historiography by allowing laymen to write and interpret history and by allowing, even encouraging, the use of secular documents in the study of history.

Perhaps the greatest effect of humanism was on education. Humanists advocated the study of such things as grammar, logic, poetry, mathematics, astronomy, and music. They sought to educate and develop every part of a person intellectually. It is from this approach to developing an individual that we get the idea of the "Renaissance man," the man who is universal, well-rounded, and adept in many fields. *The Courtier* by Conte Baldassare Castiglione (1478-1529) set forth guidelines for the ideal man, thus embracing the notion of the Renaissance man. Castiglione claimed that the ideal man should be skilled in language, literature, and the arts.

Humanism and Women

The humanist movement affected women, too. During the Middle Ages, few women outside of convents could read or write. During the Renaissance, women became increasingly literate, due in no small part to the effort of humanists who argued that women should have access to some of the same educational opportunities as men. In addition to reading and writing, some women also learned the classical languages. An extraordinary example of a classically-educated Renaissance woman is Christine de Pisan (1364-1430). After growing up in the court of Charles V of France, she later wrote his biography. Pisan's most famous, and most influential, work, *The City of Ladies*, documented the great deeds of great women in history.

Humanism and the Printed Word

The texts that were being produced by humanists were being spread across Italy and Europe at an unprecedented rate. With the invention of the movable type printing press around 1450, the German Johann Gutenberg revolutionized the way in which ideas were shared and distributed. While pre-printing press documents were produced either by hand or by block printing at tediously slow speeds, documents printed using the movable type press were produced relatively quickly and they far outnumbered their predecessors in a matter of a few short years. Many of the new documents were Bibles and other religious texts,

although a large number of the new documents were reprints of classical works, previously available only as expensive manuscripts.

THE NORTHERN RENAISSANCE

The humanism of the Italian Renaissance began to make its way into the rest of Europe during the second half of the fifteenth century. This movement in the rest of Europe, widely regarded as The Northern Renaissance, manifested itself somewhat differently than in Italy. Whereas Italian humanists focused on secular topics and texts and did not concern themselves very much with the study of Christianity or Christian texts, the humanists of the Northern Renaissance took a much different approach. They studied the early Christian texts along with original Greek and Hebrew. Basically, the difference between the Italian Renaissance and the Northern Renaissance is this: both were humanist movements, but the Northern Renaissance emphasized Christianity and the Italian Renaissance emphasized secularism and individualism.

RENAISSANCE ART

Art produced during the Renaissance represented a major break from the art that had come before it. During the Middle Ages, the church was the leading patron of art, and artists worked without ever receiving credit for their creations. The Renaissance changed both of those conditions. Wealthy merchants, bankers, and other individuals offered great wages for artists to create sculptures and paintings – frequently of the wealthy individuals themselves. With the newfound clientele, the artists achieved unprecedented social status and income levels. They no longer worked anonymously but were instead heralded as geniuses. The painters, sculptors, and architects of the Renaissance basked in the glory they received for their work.

The style of Renaissance art varied greatly from that of the Middle Ages. Medieval art – because it was paid for by the church – usually centered on religious themes and exalted the church and God. In addition, medieval art generally appeared to be more abstract than real. Renaissance art, although it sometimes portrayed religious images, tended to glorify the achievements of man. These achievements were often those of the patron but occasionally were those of some heroic figure, either mythical or Biblical. With the development of new techniques and methods, Renaissance art took new forms. Oil painting became popular throughout Italy. The use of contrast and perspective allowed Renaissance artists to create three-dimensional images unlike any seen during the Middle Ages.

Humanism played a major role in the development of the Renaissance art style. Renaissance artists, inspired by the humanist ideals, sought to reproduce the artistic

styles found in classical Greece and Rome. In both paintings and sculptures, artists went to great lengths to add intricate details. The artists wanted to glorify and accurately reproduce the human body, just as the Greeks and Romans had done centuries before.

And, in their glorification of man and the human body, artists were not afraid or ashamed to show the body in its most natural form. They frequently produced nude figures, both male and female.

The artistic style of the Italian Renaissance pushed its influence north and affected artists across Europe. The Flemish painter Jan van Eyck (1385-1440) included great detail and perspective as in his classic painting *Giovanni Arnolfini and His Bride*, and the German artist Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528) added detail, proportion, perspective, and realism to his famous paintings and woodcuts. The artistic influence of the Renaissance reached across Europe and across time, affecting European art and artists for several centuries.

THE NEW MONARCHIES

During the second half of the fifteenth century, Europe saw the rise of a new group of monarchs called the new monarchs. These rulers were skilled in diplomacy and were quite crafty, employing new methods of control over their realms. The new monarchs used many of the tactics of the Italian rulers during the Renaissance to try to obtain more power and more territory. For example, these regents often limited the power of the nobility and brought the church under their own control to increase royal authority in their lands. The best examples of these new monarchies were in England, France, and Spain.

After suffering defeat in the Hundred Years' War, England struggled to rebuild its economy. Unfortunately for England, the end of the war brought with it more than just economic hardship. The War of the Roses erupted in the 1450s between the House of York and the House of Lancaster. This civil unrest pitted aristocratic families against one another for some thirty years before Henry Tudor (1457-1509, king 1485-1509) defeated Richard III (1452-1485, king 1483-1485) and established what was to become the Tudor dynasty. One of Henry's most famous, if not infamous, accomplishments was the establishment of the Star Chamber. The Star Chamber was a court that was established to control the nobles. It used no jury, and torture was commonplace.

Although France technically won the Hundred Years' War, it too was left devastated. The economy was in ruins, farmland was destroyed, and many French lives were lost. France did, however, emerge from the war with a new sense of nationalism. King Charles VII (1403-1461, king 1422-1461) took advantage of this

new national feeling. He began to take administrative power away from the Estates-General and secured more power for the monarchy by increasing its control over the church in France. His successor, Louis XI (1423-1483, king 1461-1483), also known as the Spider, permanently imposed the *taille*, an annual tax on property, thereby securing an annual source of income for the crown. Many historians give Louis XI credit for establishing the national state.

In 1469, with the marriage of Isabella of Castile (1451-1504) and Ferdinand of Aragon (1452-1516) in Spain, two dynasties were united. Although they worked together, the two kingdoms maintained their own identities. Ferdinand and Isabella worked to strengthen royal authority and the Spanish army. They renewed a system of town-based organizations, called *hermandades*, which were to help control the lawlessness among the aristocracy. One of the major events during the reign of Ferdinand and Isabella was the Inquisition. The Inquisition, among other things, served as a political and religious tool to monitor the *conversos*, the Muslims and Jews who had converted to Catholicism. Ultimately, both the Muslims and Jews were driven from Spain. In addition to controlling domestic policy, the royal couple promoted and sponsored voyages of exploration, which eventually took Spain into its Golden Age.

MAJOR PLAYERS

Cosimo de' Medici (1389-1464) – A shrewd politician, banker, and statesman of Florence, Cosimo de' Medici held almost total control of the local politics. He held no public office; instead, he stayed behind the scenes, influencing and persuading others. He encouraged industry and favored a balance of power among the Italian states. One of the richest of all Italians of his time, Cosimo sponsored many artists and scholars.

Lorenzo de' Medici (1449-1492) – During the Renaissance, Lorenzo, often known as Lorenzo the Magnificent, continued the Medici tradition of shrewd politics. A banker by trade, Lorenzo inherited the family business and rule over the Florentine republic. After causing the pope, along with Naples, to declare war on Florence, Lorenzo single-handedly avoided warfare through his skilled diplomacy. After that incident, he spent the rest of his life patronizing great artists like Michelangelo and Botticelli.

Giovanni de' Medici (1475-1521) – The son of Lorenzo de' Medici, Giovanni became Pope Leo X and served as pope from 1513-1521. Because of the Medici tradition of an appreciation for the finer things in life, Leo accomplished more as a patron of the arts than as a pope. Leo spent excessive amounts of money on art and

architecture and sponsored such geniuses as Raphael. He also financed the rebuilding of St. Peter's Basilica. It was Leo who would eventually excommunicate Luther in 1521.

Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527) – Although Machiavelli gained fame primarily with his work *The Prince*, he was originally a historian and statesman. He held a prominent government position in Italy until the Medici family came back into power in 1512. He lost his position and was actually imprisoned for a short while. In an attempt to regain the favor of the government, Machiavelli wrote *The Prince*, a virtual instruction manual for a prince, or ruler, on the manner in which he should rule. The majority of Machiavelli's points are based on actual historical figures and their accomplishments and failures. Machiavelli strikes many people as immoral, but his political philosophy is actually amoral; he argued that a prince need not be bound by the same code of ethics and morals as citizens. Whether Machiavelli intended for the work to be taken literally, or if he simply used it as a tool to try to regain his governmental position, is a subject that has been debated for some time. His influence on political philosophy both during and after the Renaissance cannot be denied.

Giotto (c. 1267-1337) – Giotto was undoubtedly the most important and influential of all fourteenth-century Italian painters. He broke with tradition by portraying human figures in a more natural and real state rather than in the two-dimensional style that was common in the art of the Middle Ages. Although most of his work is either in poor condition or not even attributed to him, his frescos in Padua and Florence and his painting *The Ognissanti Madonna* illustrate his style, which was far ahead of his time.

Donatello (c. 1386-1466) – Donatello studied under such masters as Ghiberti and held the company of Brunelleschi. Therefore, it should be no wonder that Donatello became one of the most prominent and influential sculptors of the Renaissance. Donatello created striking sculptures such as *St. Mark* and *St. George*. However, Donatello created a masterpiece in *David*, the first nude statue of the Renaissance, for which he is most often remembered. Donatello made several trips to Rome to study the figures of antiquity. Exemplifying the Renaissance ideals, Donatello based many of his figures on the works of the ancient Romans.

Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) – If ever there lived a true Renaissance man, it was Leonardo da Vinci. Leonardo excelled in painting, architectural design, drafting, engineering, and many fields of science including meteorology, geology, and hydraulics. Educated in Florence under the supervision of Verrochio, Leonardo learned painting and sculpting.

Leonardo was nearly 30 years old before he began work on his first large piece, *The Adoration of the Magi*. Unfortunately, like many of his works, it was never finished. Some thirteen years later, Leonardo worked experimentally on one of his most famous pieces, *The Last Supper*, which was painted with oil on a plaster wall. Technically, the experiment failed because the plaster began peeling away and only through extensive restoration projects is the work somewhat preserved today. In 1503, Leonardo began painting one of the most famous portraits of all time, the *Mona Lisa*. Also known as *La Gioconda*, this painting must have held special meaning to Leonardo, as he carried it with him wherever he went.

Leonardo devoted much of his time to drafting and engineering as well as painting. Although many of his ideas were never carried out and many of his projects were never completed, his genius is evident in the numerous drawings and sketches of his fantastic contraptions and inventions. He devised many architectural plans, some of which were based on Roman architecture, but never had the opportunity to build all of his structures.

Unlike the other great minds of his time, Leonardo realized the importance of observation of the natural world. He worked on and studied extensively the circulation of the blood, the mechanics of the human eye, and the general anatomy of the human body. Leonardo was fascinated by fluids, and he did much work with hydraulics. He even theorized about the moon's effects on the tides. Leonardo's greatness, however, was not fully realized until his notes and other writings and drawings were discovered and made public after his death.

Michelangelo (1475 – 1564) – Perhaps one of the greatest artistic talents of all time, Michelangelo created some of the most beloved yet technically superior art man has ever known. Influenced as a young man by Lorenzo the Magnificent, Michelangelo trained to be an artist from the time he was a teenager. Although he created works during his teens, his first great work was the *Piatta*. Finished while he was in his early twenties, the *Piatta* depicts the crucified Christ in the lap of Mary. The detail in the marble sculpture is almost unbelievable. By the time he was thirty, Michelangelo had finished what would become his most famous work, *David*. This fourteen-foot-high statue proved to the world that Michelangelo was a master. Michelangelo combined soft detail, bold expressions, and monumental size in an unprecedented manner.

Michelangelo was more than just a sculptor, though. While on commission in Rome, Michelangelo painted the Sistine Chapel ceiling. He created an incredibly detailed fresco (while lying on his back) that included

nine different scenes from the Book of Genesis. Some of the most famous scenes include *The Creation of Adam* and *The Flood*. Michelangelo went on to create other magnificent sculptures, such as the Moses, and frescos, such as the *Last Judgment*. In addition, Michelangelo was named the head architect for St. Peter's Basilica for which he designed the famous dome. Michelangelo, along with Leonardo da Vinci, embodied the idea of the Renaissance man.

Raphael (1483-1520) – Among the greatest Italian Renaissance painters was Raphael. Raphael painted a number of Madonnas, mostly during his time in Florence. During his stay in Rome, though, Raphael created one of the true masterpieces of the Italian Renaissance. His fresco *The School of Athens* epitomizes the ideals embodied not only by Renaissance art but also by the Renaissance itself. Raphael's use of proportion, perspective and realistic detail vividly portrays, among others, Plato and Aristotle. His artistic style and his choice of subjects for the painting exemplify the art of the Renaissance.

Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375) – An Italian humanist author who grew up in Florence, Boccaccio is best known and remembered for his classic work, *The Decameron*. *The Decameron* is a collection of 100 stories told by a group of people who have retreated to the country to escape the plague. Boccaccio's work is the first and arguably the best prose work of the Renaissance.

Jan van Eyck (c.1390-1441) – Even into the sixteenth century, Jan van Eyck's fellow painters often referred to him as the King of the Painters. A Flemish painter, van Eyck helped found the *Ars Nova* or "new art" style of painting in northern Europe in the fifteenth century, which is now associated with the Northern Renaissance in Europe. This "new art" followed much of the form of Renaissance art that developed in the Italian tradition though it evolved into its own distinct style. Van Eyck's art is known for its bright and vivid colors, outstanding detail, and three-dimensional appearance. Perhaps the most recognizable van Eyck work is the portrait *Giovanni Arnolfini and his Bride* (1434), a striking portrait that epitomizes van Eyck's use of color, detail, and three-dimensional effects.

Desiderius Erasmus (c. 1466-1536) – Desiderius Erasmus was the greatest of the northern humanists and perhaps the most influential of all Christian humanists. Although his work later attributed to the movement known as the Protestant Reformation, Erasmus did not consider himself a religious reformer. Erasmus believed that Christianity should return to the simple "philosophy of Christ." He sought ways to educate people about the early Christians and about Christ. Erasmus felt that the Vulgate, which was the standard Latin translation of the New Testament, contained errors.

Therefore, he edited and published new translations of the New Testament in Greek and then in Latin. The other influential works of Erasmus include *Adages*, a book of classical proverbs, and *The Praise of Folly*, a satirization of contemporary society.

Thomas More (1478-1535) – Having received a good education in his early life, Thomas More originally set out to be a lawyer. However, this English humanist became fascinated by the classics and he learned both Greek and Latin. More translated several works by Greek authors and wrote original works in Latin. His most famous work, *Utopia*, was also his most influential work. *Utopia* describes the ideal society, a community in sharp contrast to the one in which More lived. The work illustrated More's views of the political and social problems of contemporary society. More's devotion to his beliefs later cost him his life. King Henry VIII executed More when he refused to recognize the king as the head of the Church of England.

Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592) – Montaigne was a French writer who wrote essays. He introduced the essay as a sincere literary form. The subjects of his essays were usually subjects he had pondered and considered. His *Essays* (1580) cover a variety of subjects ranging from cannibalism to bodily functions to death and dying.