

## CHAPTER 2

# THE RENAISSANCE

### 2.1 THEMES

The Renaissance occurred mainly in Italy between the years 1300 and 1600. New learning and changes in styles of art were two of the most pronounced characteristics of the Renaissance. The Renaissance contrasts with the Middle Ages:

- 1) The Renaissance was secular, not religious.
- 2) The individual, not the group, was emphasized during the Renaissance.
- 3) The Renaissance occurred in urban, not rural, areas.

Italian city-states, such as Venice, Milan, Padua, Pisa, and especially Florence were the home to most Renaissance developments, which were limited to the rich elite.

Jakob Burckhardt, in *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860), popularized the study of the period and argued

that it stood in strong contrast to the Middle Ages. Subsequent historians have often found more continuity with the Middle Ages in terms of the society and its traditions. Whether the term applies to a cultural event or merely a time period is still debated.

## 2.2 DEFINITIONS

*Renaissance* – French for ‘rebirth’; the word describes the reawakening, or rebirth, of interest in the heritage of the classical past.

*Classical past* – Greece and Rome in the years between 500 B.C. and 400 A.D. Humanist scholars were most interested in Rome from 200 B.C. to 180 A.D.

*Humanism* – The reading and understanding of writings and ideals of the classical past. Rhetoric was the initial area of study which soon widened to include poetry, history, politics, and philosophy. Civic humanism was the use of humanism in the political life of Italian city-states. Christian humanism focused on early Church writings instead of secular authors.

*Individualism* – Behavior or theory which emphasizes each person and is contrasted with corporate or community behavior or theory in which the group is emphasized at the expense of the individual. Renaissance individualism sought great accomplishments and looked for heroes of history.

*Virtu* – Excellence or virtue; closely related to the ancient Greek idea of arete. This ability could be displayed in speech, art, politics, warfare, or elsewhere by seizing the opportunities available. For many, the pursuit of virtu was amoral.

***Florentine or Platonic Academy*** – located in a country house and supported by the Medici, the leading Florentine political family, a group of scholars who initially studied the works of Plato, the ancient Greek. The leading members were Marsilio Ficino (1433 – 1499) and Pico della Mirandola (1463 – 1494).

## 2.3 CAUSES

While no cause can be clearly identified as the source for the Renaissance, several categories have been suggested by historians:

***Economic.*** Northern Italy was very wealthy as a result of serving as intermediary between the silk- and spice-producing East and the consuming West of England, France and Germany. Also, Italian merchants had built great wealth in the cloth industry and had often turned to international banking. This wealth gave people leisure to pursue new ideas and money to support the artists and scholars who produced the new works.

***Political.*** Struggles between the papacy, the Holy Roman Empire, and merchants during the Middle Ages had resulted in the independence of many small city-states in northern Italy. This fragmentation meant no single authority had the power to stop or redirect new developments. The governments of the city-states, often in the hands of one man, competed by supporting artists and scholars.

***Historical.*** Northern Italy cities were often built on the ruins of ancient Roman ones, and the citizens knew of their heritage.

***Ideas.*** The appearance of men fleeing the falling Byzantine

Empire brought new ideas, including the study of Greek, to Italy. Also, during the numerous wars between the Italian city-states, contestants sought justifications for their claims in the actions of the past, even back to the classical past. Finally, the study of Roman law during disputes between the popes and the Holy Roman Emperors led to study of other Roman writers.

## 2.4 LITERATURE, ART, AND SCHOLARSHIP

### 2.4.1 *Literature*

Humanists, as both orators and poets, were inspired by and imitated works of the classical past. The literature was more secular and covered more subjects than that of the Middle Ages.

*Dante* (1265 – 1321), a Florentine writer who spent much of his life in exile after being on the losing side in political struggles in Florence. His *Divine Comedy*, describing a journey through hell, purgatory, and heaven, shows that reason can only take people so far and then God's grace and revelation must be used. Dealing with many other issues and with much symbolism, the work is the pinnacle of medieval poetry.

*Petrarch* (1304 – 1374) wrote in both Latin and Italian, encouraged the study of ancient Rome, collected and preserved much work of ancient writers, and produced much work in the classical literary style. He is best known for his sonnets, including many expressing his love for a married woman named Laura, and is considered the father of humanism.

*Boccaccio* (1313 – 1375) wrote *The Decameron*, a collection of short stories in Italian, which meant to amuse, not edify, the reader.

**Castiglione** (1478 – 1529), authored *The Book of the Courtier* which specified the qualities necessary for a gentleman—including the development of both intellectual and physical qualities—who will lead an active, non-contemplative life. Abilities in conversation, sports, arms, dance, music, Latin and Greek should be combined with an agreeable personal demeanor. The book was translated into many languages and greatly influenced Western ideas about correct education and behavior.

#### 2.4.2 Art

Artists also broke with the medieval past, in both technique and content.

**Painting.** Medieval painting, usually depicting religious topics and for religious uses, was idealized, and portrayed the essence or idea of the topic. Renaissance art sometimes used religious topics, but often dealt with secular themes or portraits of individuals. Oil paints, chiaroscuro, and linear perspectives all combined to produce works of energy in three dimensions.

**Sculpture.** Medieval sculpture was dominated by works of religious significance. The idealized forms of individuals, such as saints, were often used in the education of the faithful who could not easily deal with concepts. By copying classical models and using free standing pieces, Renaissance sculptors produced works celebrating the individualistic and non-religious spirit of the day.

**Architecture.** Medieval architecture included the use of pointed arches, flying buttresses, and fan vaulting to obtain great heights while permitting light to flood the interior of the building, usually a church or cathedral. The result gave a 'feeling' for God rather than the approach through reason. The busy details, filling every niche, and the absence of symmetry also typify medieval work.

Renaissance architects openly copied classical, especially Roman, forms, such as the rounded arch and squared angles, while constructing town and country houses for the rich and urban buildings for cities.

Several artists became associated with the new style or art:

**Giotto** (1266 – 1336) painted religious scenes using light and shadow, a technique called *chiaroscuro*, to create an illusion of depth and greater realism. He is considered the father of Renaissance painting.

**Donatello** (1386 – 1466), the father of Renaissance sculpture, produced, in his *David*, the first statue cast in bronze since classical times.

**Masaccio** (1401 – 1428) emphasized naturalism in *Expulsion of Adam and Eve* by showing real human figures, in the nude, with three-dimensions, expressing emotion.

**Leonardo da Vinci** (1452 – 1519), produced numerous works, including *Last Supper* and *Mona Lisa*, as well as many mechanical designs, though few were ever constructed.

**Raphael** (1483 – 1520), a master of Renaissance grace and style, theory and technique, represented these skills in *The School of Athens*.

**Michelangelo** (1475 – 1564), a universal man, produced masterpieces in architecture, sculpture (*David*), and painting (the Sistine Chapel ceiling). His work was a bridge to new, non-Renaissance style called Mannerism.

### 2.4.3 Scholars

Scholars sought to know what is good and to practice it, as

men did in the Middle Ages. However, people of the Renaissance sought more practical results and did not judge things by religious standards. Manuscript collections enabled scholars to study the primary sources they used and to reject all traditions which had been built up since classical times. Also, scholars participated in the lives of their cities as active politicians.

*Leonardo Bruni* (1370 – 1444), civic humanist, served as chancellor of Florence where he used his rhetorical skills to rouse the citizens against external enemies. He also wrote a history of his city and was the first to use the term humanism.

*Lorenzo Valla* (1407 – 1457), authored *Elegances of the Latin Language*, the standard text in Latin philology, and also exposed the Donation of Constantine, which purported to give the Papacy control of vast lands in Italy, as a forgery.

*Machiavelli* (1469 – 1527), wrote *The Prince*, and analyzed politics from the standpoint of expedience rising above morality in the name of maintaining political power.

## 2.5 THE RENAISSANCE OUTSIDE ITALY

Outside of Italy, the Renaissance primarily took its form from religion and was less influenced by the classics. Christian humanism (the application of humanist approaches to Christianity) is discussed in 2.6.

*The Low Countries.* Artists still produced works on religious themes but the attention to detail in the paintings of Jan van Eyck (1385 – 1440) typifies Renaissance ideas. Later artists include the nearly surreal Pieter Brueghel (1520 – 1569) and Rembrandt van Rijn (1606 – 1669).

**Germany.** The invention at Mainz around 1450 of printing with movable type, traditionally attributed to Johannes Gutenberg, enabled new ideas to be spread throughout Europe more easily. Albrecht Dürer (1471 – 1528) gave realism and individuality to the art of the woodcut.

**France.** Many Italian artists and scholars were hired. The Loire Valley chateaux of the sixteenth century and Rabelais' (1494 – 1553) *Gargantua and Pantagruel* reflect Renaissance tastes.

**England.** The Renaissance did not appear in England until the sixteenth century. Drama, culminating in the age of Shakespeare, is the most pronounced accomplishment of the Renaissance spirit in England.

**Spain.** Wealth from New World conquests helped to promote the creation of new architecture, such as the Escorial, a palace and monastery, and art, such as that by El Greco (1541 – 1614), who is often considered to have worked in the style of Mannerism.

## 2.6 CHRISTIAN HUMANISM

### 2.6.1 *Theme*

Much of the Renaissance outside Italy focused on religious matters by studying the writings of the early Christian church, rather than the secular authors of Rome and Greece.

### 2.6.2 *Elements*

Although they used the techniques of the Italian humanists in the analysis of ancient writings, language and style, Christian humanists were more interested in providing guidance on personal behavior.



The work on Christian sources, done between 1450 and 1530, emphasized education and the power of the human intellect to bring about institutional change and moral improvement. The many tracts and guides of Christian humanists were directed at reforming the church but led many into criticisms of the church which resulted in the Reformation. Additionally, the discovery that traditional Christian texts had different versions proved unsettling to many believers.

Though many Christian humanists were not clergymen, most early reformers of the church during the Reformation had been trained as Christian humanists.

Christian Humanism, with its emphasis on toleration and education, disappeared due to the increasing passions of the Reformation after 1530.

### 2.6.3 *Biographies*

*Desiderius Erasmus* (1466 – 1536), a Dutchman and the most notable figure of the Christian humanist movement, made new translations of the Greek and Latin versions of the New Testament in order to have ‘purer’ editions. His book *The Praise of Folly* satirizes the ambitions of the world, most especially those of the clergy. A man known throughout the intellectual circles of Europe, he emphasized the virtues of tolerance, restraint, and education at the time the church was fragmenting during the Reformation. Erasmus led a life of simple piety, practicing the Christian virtues, which led to complaints that he had no role for the institutional church. His criticisms of the church and clergy, though meant to lead to reforms, gave ammunition to those wishing to attack the church and, therefore, it is said, “Erasmus laid the egg that Luther hatched.”

*Thomas More* (1478 – 1536), an English lawyer, politician, and humanist, wrote *Utopia* (a Greek word for ‘nowhere’).

Mixing civic humanism with religious ideals, the book describes a perfect society, located on an imaginary island, in which war, poverty, religious intolerance, and other problems of the early sixteenth century do not exist. *Utopia* sought to show how people might live if they followed the social and political ideals of Christianity. Also, in a break with medieval thought, More portrayed government as very active in the economic life of the society, as well as education and public health. Though a critic of the church and clergy of his day, More was executed by Henry VIII, king of England, for refusing to countenance Henry's break with the pope on religious matters.

*Jacques Lefevre d'Étapes* (1454 – 1536), the leading French humanist, produced five versions of the Psalms, his *Quincuplex Psalterium*, which challenged the belief in the tradition of a single, authoritative Bible. Also, his work on St. Paul anticipated that of Luther.

*Francesco Ximenes de Cisneros* (1436 – 1517), leader of the Spanish church as Grand Inquisitor, founded a university and produced the *Complutensian Polyglot Bible*, which had Hebrew, Greek, and Latin versions of the Bible in parallel columns. He also reformed the Spanish clergy and church so that most criticisms of the later reformers during the Reformation did not apply to Spain.