

LESSON 2

Ideas and Art of the Renaissance

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

- How can ideas be reflected in art, sculpture, and architecture?

READING HELPDESK

Academic Vocabulary

- attain
- core
- style
- circumstance

Content Vocabulary

- humanism
- fresco
- vernacular
- perspective

TAKING NOTES:

Key Ideas and Details

Organizing Use a chart like the following one to identify how Renaissance education was affected by humanism.

Area:
Effect:
Effect:
Effect:

IT MATTERS BECAUSE

Renaissance humanism focused European culture on the individual, marking a major change from the religion-centered view of the Middle Ages. The goal of the humanists was to educate the whole person, much as modern educators seek to do. Today's liberal arts curriculum began during the Renaissance.

Italian Renaissance Humanism

GUIDING QUESTION *How did humanism help define the Italian Renaissance?*

Secularism and an emphasis on the individual characterized the Renaissance. These characteristics are most noticeable in the intellectual and artistic accomplishments of the period. A key intellectual movement of the Renaissance was **humanism**.

Development of Humanism

Humanism was based on the study of the classics, the literature of ancient Greece and Rome. Humanists studied grammar, rhetoric, poetry, moral philosophy, and history. Today these subjects are called the humanities.

The humanists approached the classics in new ways. In the Middle Ages, writers had quoted the surviving classical texts in order to give authority to their religious writings. The humanists had a different goal. They wanted to use classical values to revitalize their culture. The humanists also felt a different relationship with the writers of antiquity. They saw the ancient Greek and Roman writers as their intellectual equals.

Francesco Petrarch (PEE • TRAHK) is often called the father of Italian Renaissance humanism. He did more than any other individual in the fourteenth century to foster its development. He looked for forgotten Latin manuscripts and set in motion a search for similar manuscripts in monastic libraries throughout Europe. Petrarch also began the humanist emphasis on using pure classical Latin. This meant Latin as it was used by the ancient Romans, rather

than medieval Latin. Humanists used the works of two Roman writers as models—Cicero for prose and Virgil for poetry.

Fourteenth-century humanists such as Petrarch had described the intellectual life as one of solitude. They rejected family and a life of action in the community. In contrast, humanists in the early fifteenth century took a new interest in civic life. They believed that intellectuals had a duty to live an active civic life and to put their study of the humanities to the state's service. It is no accident that they served as secretaries in the Italian states and to princes and popes.

Byzantine and Islamic influences were also important to the development of Renaissance humanism. Byzantine scholars provided knowledge of the ancient Greek language, and Islamic scholars served as transmitters of ancient Greek culture.

Vernacular Literature

The humanist emphasis on classical Latin led to its widespread use in the writings of scholars, lawyers, and religious writers. However, some writers wrote in the **vernacular**, the local spoken language. People in different parts of Italy spoke different Italian dialects. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the literary works of Dante (DAHN • tay) Alighieri and Christine de Pizan helped make vernacular literature popular.

Dante wrote his masterpiece, the *Divine Comedy*, in the dialect of his native Florence, which would later become the Italian language. The *Divine Comedy* is a long poem describing the soul's journey to **attain** Paradise. Dante defended his use of the vernacular in the *Divine Comedy*, arguing that if he had written in Latin, only scholars would have understood him.

PRIMARY SOURCE

“The Latin could only have explained them to scholars; for the rest would have not understood it. Therefore, as among those who desire to understand them there are many more illiterate than learned, [it follows that the Latin would not have fulfilled this behest as well as the vulgar tongue, which is understood both by the learned and the unlearned.]”

—Dante Alighieri, from *De vulgari eloquentia* (“Of Literature in the Vernacular”)

humanism an intellectual movement of the Renaissance based on the study of the humanities, which included grammar, rhetoric, poetry, moral philosophy, and history

vernacular the language of everyday speech in a particular region

attain to gain or achieve



◀ In this painting by Domenico di Michelino, Dante stands outside the walls of Florence and holds a copy of his *Divine Comedy*.

► CRITICAL THINKING

Making Connections How does this painting reflect Renaissance humanism's emphasis on the individual?



Gutenberg (c. 1400–1468)

Johannes Gutenberg was born in Mainz, Germany. Beginning in the 1440s, and borrowing from several existing technologies, he developed a method of printing using blocks of movable type set on a mechanical press. This process took more than a decade, and Gutenberg borrowed heavily to finance his printing press. In 1455 the Gutenberg Bible became the earliest book printed from movable type in Europe.

► CRITICAL THINKING

Drawing Conclusions Why might Gutenberg have chosen the Bible as a first project for his printing press?

core basic or essential part

Another writer who used the vernacular was Christine de Pizan, an Italian who lived in France and wrote in French. She is best known for her works written in defense of women. In *The Book of the City of Ladies*, written between 1404 and 1405, she denounced the many male writers who had argued that women, by their very nature, are unable to learn. Women, de Pizan argued, could attain learning as well as men if they could attend the same schools, since “a woman’s nature is clever and quick enough to learn speculative sciences as well as to discover them, and likewise the manual arts...”

✓ READING PROGRESS CHECK

Explaining How did the Renaissance contribute to the rediscovery of classical civilization and the development of vernacular literature?

Renaissance Education

GUIDING QUESTION *How was education during the Renaissance shaped by humanism?*

The humanist movement had a profound effect on education in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Education during this time became increasingly secular—less focused on religion. Renaissance humanists believed that education could change human beings. They wrote books on education and opened schools based on their ideas.

At the **core** of humanist schools were the liberal studies. These form the basis of today’s liberal arts. According to the humanists, students should learn history, ethics, public speaking, grammar, logic, poetry, mathematics, astronomy, and music. Humanists believed that liberal studies enabled individuals to reach their full potential. The purpose of a liberal education was to produce individuals who follow a path of virtue and wisdom. These individuals should also possess rhetorical skills so they could persuade others to take this same path.

Humanist educators thought that education was a practical preparation for life. Its aim was to create well-rounded citizens, not great scholars. Humanist education was also considered necessary for preparing the sons of aristocrats for leadership roles. Following the classical ideal of a sound mind in a sound body, humanist educators also emphasized physical education. Students learned the skills of javelin throwing, archery, and dancing. They ran, wrestled, hunted, and swam. The few female students who attended humanist schools studied the classics and were encouraged to know some history as well as how to ride, dance, sing, play the lute, and appreciate poetry.

The development of printing affected not only education, but eventually all aspects of Renaissance culture. Beginning in the mid-fifteenth century, the use of movable type was pioneered by the German printer Johannes Gutenberg (GOO • tehn • BURG). This innovation started a revolution that has affected how knowledge is distributed ever since. As the number of printing presses multiplied, the effects of new technology were felt in every area of European life. The printing of books encouraged scholarly research and stimulated an ever-expanding reading public’s desire to gain knowledge.

✓ READING PROGRESS CHECK

Identifying Central Ideas What was the focus of education for the Renaissance humanists?

Italian Renaissance Art

GUIDING QUESTION *How did humanism influence the works of Renaissance artists and authors?*

Renaissance artists sought to imitate nature. They wanted viewers to be convinced of the reality of their subjects. At the same time, these artists were developing a new, human-focused worldview. To emphasize this, many artists painted the human body.

New Techniques in Painting

The works of the fourteenth-century Italian painter Giotto anticipated some of the innovations of the Renaissance. His style focused on depicting human beings and their realities and dramas.

However, the Renaissance period in art truly began with Tommaso di Giovanni, called Masaccio (muh • ZAH • chee • OH). His **frescoes** are the first masterpieces of Early Renaissance (1400–1490) art. A **fresco** is a painting done on fresh, wet plaster with water-based paints. Human figures in medieval paintings look flat, but Masaccio's figures have depth and "come alive." By mastering the laws of **perspective**, Masaccio could create the illusion of three dimensions, leading to a new, realistic **style**. One of his most famous works is *The Tribute Money*, which depicts the story of the life of Peter, a Christian saint. It is one of many frescoes Masaccio was commissioned to paint in the Brancacci Chapel in Florence.

Other fifteenth-century Florentine painters used and modified this new, or Renaissance, style. Especially important were two major developments. One development stressed the technical side of painting. This included understanding the laws of perspective and the organization of outdoor space and light through geometry. The second development was the investigation of movement and human anatomy. Realistic portrayal of the individual, especially the human nude, became one of the chief aims of Italian Renaissance art.

Sculpture and Architecture

The Renaissance produced equally stunning advances in sculpture and architecture. Like painters, Renaissance sculptors and architects sought to express a human-centered world. The sculptor Donatello studied the statues of the Greeks and Romans. His works included a realistic, free-standing marble figure of George, a Christian saint.

The buildings of classical Rome inspired the work of architect Filippo Brunelleschi (BROO • nuh • LEHS • kee). His design of the church of San Lorenzo in Florence reflects this. The classical columns and rounded arches in the church's interior design create an environment that does not overwhelm the worshiper, as Gothic cathedrals might. The church creates an open airy space to fit human, and not divine, needs. Using his mathematical and artistic skills, Brunelleschi came up with a way to build the large exterior dome. Likewise, he rediscovered the classical principles of linear-perspective construction, which had disappeared from use during the Middle Ages. These principles helped Renaissance artists create realistic imagery.

fresco painting done on fresh, wet plaster with water-based paints

perspective artistic techniques used to give the effect of three-dimensional depth to two-dimensional surfaces

style having a distinctive quality or form

▼ Architect Filippo Brunelleschi's technical achievements mark the design and construction of the dome for the Cathedral of Florence as one of the major artistic landmarks of the Renaissance.

► CRITICAL THINKING

Drawing Conclusions Why might an architect be an appropriate model for the humanist ideal of the universal Renaissance person?





▲ The first casual portrait, Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* revolutionized art.

► **CRITICAL THINKING**

Making Inferences Why would portraiture be a natural development for a Renaissance culture shaped by humanism?

circumstance a determining condition

High Renaissance Masters

The final stage of Italian Renaissance painting flourished from about 1490 to 1520. Called the High Renaissance, this period is associated with Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael Sanzio, and Michelangelo Buonarroti and their works.

Leonardo da Vinci was the model “Renaissance man.” He was an artist, scientist, inventor, and visionary. Leonardo mastered the art of realistic painting, even dissecting human bodies to better understand their workings. However, he wanted to go beyond such realism to create idealized forms that captured the perfection of nature in the individual. Leonardo could not express his vision of perfection fully in a realistic style.

At age 25, Raphael Sanzio was already one of Italy’s best painters. He was admired for his numerous madonnas (paintings of Mary, the mother of Jesus). In these, he achieved an ideal of beauty far surpassing human standards. Raphael is also well known for his frescoes in the Vatican Palace. His *School of Athens* reveals a world of balance, harmony, and order—the underlying principles of classical Greek and Roman art.

Michelangelo Buonarroti, an accomplished painter, sculptor, and architect, was another master of the High Renaissance. Fiercely driven by his desire to create, he worked with great passion and energy on a remarkable number of projects. Michelangelo’s figures on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Rome depict an ideal type of human being with perfect proportions. The beauty of this idealized human being is meant to be a reflection of divine beauty—the more beautiful the body, the more godlike the figure.

✓ **READING PROGRESS CHECK**

Specifying In what ways did Italian artists use the ideas of the humanist movement in their works?

The Northern Artistic Renaissance

GUIDING QUESTION How did the works of northern European artists differ from those of Italian artists?

Like the Italian artists, the artists of northern Europe sought to portray their world realistically. However, their approach was different from that of the Italians. This was particularly true of the artists of the Low Countries (present-day Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands).

Circumstance played a role in the differences. The large wall spaces of Italian churches had encouraged the art of fresco painting. Italian artists used these spaces to master the technical skills that allowed them to portray humans in realistic settings. In the north, the Gothic cathedrals of the Middle Ages, with their stained glass windows, did not allow enough space for frescoes. Instead, northern European artists painted illustrations for books and wooden panels for altarpieces. Great care was needed to depict each object on a small scale.

The most important northern school of art in the 1400s was in Flanders, one of the Low Countries. Flemish artists typically placed their subjects among everyday objects, as in Robert Campin’s *Merode Altarpiece*. Campin, one of the earliest Flemish masters of painting, used shadows to create depth and the smallest details to reflect reality. The Flemish painter Jan van Eyck (EYK) was among the first to use and perfect the technique of oil painting. He used a varnish made of linseed oil and nut oils mixed with resins. This medium enabled van Eyck to use a wide variety of brilliant colors. With his oil paints, he could create striking realism in fine details, as in his painting *Giovanni Arnolfini and His Bride*. Like other Northern

Renaissance artists, however, van Eyck imitated nature not by using perspective, as the Italians did, but by simply observing reality and portraying details as best he could.

By 1500, artists from the north had begun to study in Italy and to be influenced by what artists were doing there. One German artist who was greatly affected by the Italians was Albrecht Dürer. He made two trips to Italy and absorbed most of what the Italians could teach on the laws of perspective. Like the Italian artists of the High Renaissance, Dürer tried to achieve a standard of ideal beauty that was based on a careful examination of the human form. He did not reject the use of minute details typical of northern artists. However, he did try to fit those details more harmoniously into his works in accordance with Italian artistic theories.

✓ READING PROGRESS CHECK

Contrasting What was a key difference between the northern European artists and the Italian artists?

▼ This central panel of the *Merode Altarpiece* by Flemish artist Robert Campin (c. 1378–1444) shows the Annunciation, when the archangel Gabriel told Mary she was to be the mother of Jesus.

► CRITICAL THINKING

Making Connections For the people who first saw this painting, what effect might have been created by the placement of this religious scene in an everyday setting?



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LESSON 2 REVIEW

Reviewing Vocabulary

1. **Explaining** Write a paragraph explaining why vernacular literature eventually became the preferred way to produce books.

Using Your Notes

2. **Explaining** Using your chart on the effects of humanism on a Renaissance education, write a brief paragraph explaining these effects.

Answering the Guiding Questions

3. **Finding the Main Idea** How did humanism help define the Italian Renaissance?

4. **Evaluating** How was education during the Renaissance shaped by humanism?

5. **Making Connections** How did humanism influence the works of Renaissance artists and authors? Give specific examples.

6. **Contrasting** How did the works of northern European artists differ from the works of Italian artists?

Writing Activity

7. **Informative/Explanatory** Write a paragraph describing one of the works of art in the lesson. Pay particular attention to how the image is representative of the humanist movement of the Renaissance. Be sure to use descriptive words that will help your reader visualize the work of art.