

# 12 – The Renaissance: 1350-1550

*The Renaissance was a period of change following the crises that ultimately transformed the civilization of the late medieval world. Wars, the Black Death, and demographic changes such as the growth of towns and trade led to intellectual, artistic, social, economic, and political changes that collectively shaped this new era, the age of the Renaissance.*

## KEY TERMS

<i>cinquecento</i>	Hanseatic League	national monarchies	<i>quattrocento</i>	vernacular
city-states	humanism	patronage	Renaissance	
Great Schism	individualism	primogeniture	secularism	

## KEY CONCEPTS

- Recovering from the conflicts of the late medieval period, including the Hundred Years' War, some regions in Europe were organized into national monarchies. Political leaders imposed their will on surrounding areas, forming the modern nation states of France, Spain, and England. Italy did not form a national monarchy at the time, but instead was a collection of city-states, each ruled by a powerful family.
- Italy, the geographical gateway between East and West, had a cultural and economic advantage over the rest of Europe and traded extensively. The Italian city-states soon became the trade and cultural centers of Renaissance Europe.
- The rediscovery of classical science and scholarship, led by Byzantine and Islamic scholars, spawned a renewal of interest in the study of art, science, philosophy, and the classical world and launched intellectual pursuits that began in Italy and spread over Northern and Southern Europe from about 1350 to 1550. The dissemination of this new learning was accelerated by late medieval and Renaissance writings that were produced in the vernacular, and by the invention of the printing press in the 1450s.

For a full discussion of the Renaissance, see *Western Civilization*, 8th and 9th editions, Chapters 11 and 12.

## What Was the Renaissance?

The Renaissance was a unique period in European history. It began in Italy in about 1350 and spread throughout most of Southern and Northern Europe, culminating in the recovery from the crises of the fourteenth century, the renewal of interest in the classical civilizations of the Greeks and Romans, the development of a new appreciation of the abilities of the individual, and the creation of new styles of art. Although much of what characterizes the Renaissance actually began in the late medieval period – such as the growth of towns and the breakdown of the feudal system – it was during the Renaissance that these trends became dominant and widespread. The Renaissance can therefore be considered a distinct historical period.

## Renaissance Economic and Social Structures

The seed for the Renaissance sprouted in Italy with the revival of trade with the Near East in the eleventh century. Italian cities quickly developed into vibrant urban societies, and Italian merchants became masters of bookkeeping, finding new markets, and securing monopolies on trade commodities. During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, these moneyed Italian cities expanded into the surrounding countryside to become powerful city-states

that dominated the economic and political life around them, thriving as a result of the emergence of the merchant class.

Italian dominance in commerce was hurt during the fourteenth century by competition with the powerful merchants of the Hanseatic League, a commercial and military alliance of more than 100 North German cities and guilds that dominated Baltic Sea trade. As a result, the Italians began to lose their dominant position in commerce. Also afflicted by the plague, Italian merchants soon lost economic ground in Northern Europe. This recession in trade, however, was temporary. The Italian city-states' trade revived once again in the fifteenth century with the decline of the Hanseatic League, and it economically fueled the Renaissance. The wool trade in Flanders and Florence expanded again, as did the sale of new luxury trade items, such as silks and glassware. At the same time, the mining industry began to develop.

The growth of trade and new industries required economic and commercial support, so banking became a vast source of wealth, spawning powerfully rich families, including the Medici in Florence. The Medici banking house became the largest in Europe, financing the political rise of that family in both the city-state of Florence and the Roman Catholic Church.

Although the feudal system gave way to the system of national monarchies in many areas of Europe, the basic

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social structure, based on three estates, remained largely in place during the Renaissance. Members of the First Estate, the clergy, enjoyed clerical privilege and were subject only to the laws of the Church. Most also paid no taxes. This estate consisted of upper clergy, such as the pope, cardinals, bishops, and archbishops; and the lower clergy, such as the parish priests and friars. During the Renaissance, most Europeans still lived by the law of primogeniture, in which the eldest son inherited the property. Many younger sons of the aristocracy continued to live the lives of aristocrats by becoming upper clergymen, a position of wealth and power. Although some of these clergymen faithfully served the church, many paid little attention to their clerical duties, and for this they were resented by many commoners.

Members of the Second Estate, the nobility, owned much of the land in Europe and held most of the important military and political positions. During the Renaissance, expectations for aristocrats changed; they were supposed to possess a classical education, have an interest in the arts, behave like gentlemen and ladies, and embrace the ideals of civic virtue. The Italian writer Baldassare Castiglione outlined the behavior expected of a Renaissance aristocrat in his book *The Courtier*.

The Third Estate – all those who did not make up the clergy or nobility – continued to diversify during the Renaissance, with peasant members of the Third Estate representing about 90 percent of the European population. In the Italian city-states and other trade centers, merchants and artisans gained considerable wealth and political influence, although many poor, often unemployed people also lived in those areas. At the bottom of the social structure were slaves. Western European slave markets had existed since the twelfth century, when Muslim slaves were sold by the Spanish to wealthy Italians. After the Black Death reduced the number of farm laborers, the demand for slaves soared and slaves of many different races were imported from Africa, the Balkans, Constantinople, Cyprus, Crete, and the lands surrounding the Black Sea, with the majority arriving from the Eastern Mediterranean and Black Sea regions. Italian law gave owners complete control over their slaves, but the slaves were often treated well because they were a considerable investment – an average healthy young slave cost about the equivalent of several years' wages for a free servant.

### The Renaissance Family

Marriages were arranged during the Renaissance, often as business deals designed to increase the wealth and status of families. In Italy, women typically married between ages 16 and 18, while most men married in their 30s or early 40s. Within the family, the man made all the legal and

financial decisions and expected the woman to bear children and manage the home. For an aristocratic woman, this meant managing the servants, managing the estate while her husband was away, and hosting social gatherings. Aristocratic women typically used wet nurses and attempted to have as many children as possible so there would be a surviving heir despite the high mortality rate for children. Wives of merchants and farmers handled the home responsibilities and also helped their husbands in the shop or in the fields. Working-class women usually nursed their own children, so they did not conceive at the same rate as the wealthy. Sometimes young unmarried women made a living working as prostitutes in the cities.

#### AP Tip

Remember that although Renaissance women had important roles in their families, most women did not have political rights and were considered lower in status than men. Unlike the Middle Ages, when women sometimes worked in shops and even served as masters in guilds, Renaissance women increasingly found themselves restricted from the guilds and without political and economic power. It is important to know about the changing roles played by women of the Renaissance era; facts like these can be useful when interpreting documents for a document-based question or writing a free-response thematic essay.

### Renaissance Politics

Two major forms of governance emerged during the Renaissance: the Italian city-states and national monarchies. In Italy, there were a number of small city-states and five dominant, wealthy, powerful city-states: Florence, the Papal States, Naples, Milan, and Venice. Florence, Milan, and Venice were all technically republics, although in practice they were governed by wealthy and powerful oligarchies directed by rich merchants and aristocratic families who often intermarried to increase their power. They rarely allowed true republican control and often excluded the common people of their territories from voting or even holding citizenship. Conflicts among the city-states prevented them from combining into a united Italy and often erupted into wars.

Diplomatic efforts and the Treaty of Lodi (1454), attempts to create a peaceful settlement and maintain an effective balance of power, fell victim to conflicts over familial land claims and papal elections. The competition among the states and their inability to cooperate with one another made them an inviting target for foreign invaders eager to gain control over their land and wealth. Eventually, rivalries between Spain and France and their ongoing battles in Italy led to the sacking of Rome in 1527 and the subsequent extension of Spanish power into Italy.

The inability of the states to band together to fight off foreign control ultimately delayed Italian unification and nationhood until 1870.

### AP Tip

The modern diplomatic system of resident ambassadors emerged in the Italian city-states during the Renaissance. Although temporary visiting ambassadors had been used during the Middle Ages, resident ambassadors first became widespread during this era. Their presence in the different states led to the development of protocols for the treatment of ambassadors and for conducting diplomatic business. This is a good example of one way that politics during the Renaissance differed from previous eras.

In Northern Europe, divided feudal kingdoms gradually gave way to national monarchies as growing towns began to form alliances with kings. This allowed the new monarchs to hire loyal merchants and townspeople for bureaucratic jobs, thus reducing the power of the nobles and weakening the bonds of feudal society. As a result of the Hundred Years' War and the Great Schism, the clergy and nobility were in decline and were less able to assert their power against the emerging monarchies. This allowed the emergence of sovereign states with centralized economic, military, and bureaucratic powers. The ability to create a standing national army with professional soldiers, and sometimes mercenaries, gave kings more power, but it also forced them to become creative fundraisers because they had to pay for their military and bureaucratic expenses without directly taxing the nobility. The most important national monarchies to emerge during the Renaissance were France, Spain, and England. England's defeat in the Hundred Years' War and the collapse of Burgundy allowed for the consolidation of the French monarchy. Following its defeat in the Hundred Years' War, England experienced a period of political upheaval. The War of the Roses, a civil war that began in the 1450s, ended in 1485, when Richard III was defeated by Henry Tudor, who as Henry VII consolidated the power of the English monarchy.

During the Middle Ages, Castile and Aragon emerged as the two strongest Christian kingdoms on the Iberian peninsula. The marriage of Isabella of Castile to Ferdinand of Aragon allowed for the creation of the Spanish monarchy; together, the two rulers could secure their borders, control the population, venture to the new world, and take control of religion in their realm through the institution of the Inquisition. Although both kingdoms maintained their own administrative institutions (such as their Cortes and courts), the royal council was composed mainly of middle-class bureaucrats instead of power-hungry noblemen, and it promoted the idea that the monarchs embodied state power,

thus consolidating political power into their hands. Militarily, the development of a professional royal army by Ferdinand and Isabella to replace the feudal-style armies allowed the monarchs to effectively control their lands. By the beginning of the 1500s, the Spanish army, with its strong infantry force, had become the strongest in Europe, allowing Spain to expand its power to new territories. In terms of religion, the monarchs consolidated their control over church and religious matters in several ways. Ferdinand and Isabella gained control over the Spanish Church when they were granted the right to designate important Church officials. Likewise, the institution of the Inquisition in 1478 allowed them to expel Jews and Muslims and many converts suspected of not actually being fully converted, thus leading to uniformity of religious belief. The consolidation of Spanish power in the fifteenth century made Spain one of the most powerful nations in Europe by the sixteenth century.

The exception to this model of centralization was the Holy Roman Empire, the center of which later became modern Germany. By the thirteenth century, the Empire had grown into a collection of virtually independent principalities, free imperial city-states (self-governing cities), and ecclesiastical (church-owned and -governed) states, all nominally under the control of an elected Holy Roman Emperor. By allowing seven elector states to choose the emperor, the electoral process ensured weakness. Although the Habsburg family ruled the Empire continuously from 1452 on, emperors had to deal with internal disputes among the hundreds of individual German rulers and with external threats posed by the growing power of the Turks and the presence of the French in the Italian states.

The Renaissance witnessed the beginnings of a profound shift in political philosophy, as well as political organization. In *Education of a Christian Prince* (1516), the Dutch humanist Erasmus closely reflected medieval political views when he declared that a prince has moral obligations to his subjects. His contemporary Niccolò Machiavelli, who was active in Florentine politics and witness to the intrigue of Renaissance statecraft, wrote books and treatises on politics. The most famous is *The Prince*, written in 1513 but not published until 1532. He recommended a more practical approach to politics: to be successful, to accomplish his goals for the state, a prince should be guided not by moral conscience, but by expediency.

## Renaissance Humanism

Celebrating individualism and secularism, humanism was the defining intellectual movement of the Renaissance. The humanists, many of them writers and teachers,

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advocated the study of liberal arts and the examination of classical works. Humanism changed the way Europeans perceived the world and encouraged skepticism of traditional authorities, including the Catholic Church. Often called the father of humanism, the Italian writer known as Petrarch promoted the study of the classics and ancient Greece and Rome. The growth of humanism in Italy spawned a new interest in classical values, such as civic virtue, and a rising curiosity about classical writers and philosophers. Eager scholars, including Pico della Mirandola, even formed humanist societies – among them, the Neoplatonist organization known as the Florentine Platonic Academy, which enjoyed the patronage of Cosimo de' Medici.

The emergence of humanism and the growth of interest in intellectual pursuits among wealthy laymen led to the proliferation of humanist schools and tutors. Education was primarily for the elite, who believed it provided practical preparation for their participation in the lives of their communities. Renaissance humanists promoted the study of the humanities: grammar, rhetoric, poetry, ethics, and history. Basing their studies on the classical works of Greece and Rome, humanists began to free education and thinking from the tight grip of church authorities. With the development of the movable-type printing press in the mid-fifteenth century, the demand for printed materials and lay education grew rapidly.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the growth of the printing industry proved exceptionally profitable to printers. Demand for books created by the new, cheaper method of production created an explosion in printing. Intellectually, the expansion of a literate lay public and the growing number of schools and universities created an educated population that questioned the status quo and thirsted for new ideas. As a result, many types of printed materials became popular, including books on piety and religion, calendars and almanacs, works on philosophy, popular romances, and “how-to” books about subjects such as farming and child rearing. Movable-type printing allowed for the creation of standardized and definitive texts and facilitated cooperation among scholars in various regions of Europe, accelerating the tempo of learning and scientific discoveries. Printing also led to an explosion of religious materials, from Bibles and prayer books to biblical commentaries. Protestant reformers also used printing to distribute their new religious ideas, and both Protestants and Catholics put out propaganda about the Reformation. A literate lay public began to question the Church.

### Renaissance Art

The Renaissance is famously a period of creativity and innovation in art and architecture. Stimulus came from various quarters: the patronage of powerful and wealthy

individuals and rulers, such as the Medici in Florence, financing for its projects from the Church, and investment by wealthy merchant groups, such as the Florentine cloth merchants.

Renaissance art differed from medieval art in several significant ways. Religious themes remained the subject of much Renaissance art, especially in Northern Europe, where many artists specialized in altarpieces and manuscripts. Classical and secular themes, however, also emerged – a result of the growing influence of humanism and the increasing interest in classical ideas and writings – and the renewed appreciation of human worth and individualism made portraiture popular. Advances in the study and application of mathematical and scientific principles were applied to Renaissance art; colors became more realistic, as did the portrayal of anatomy and the representation of perspective. Renaissance artists also depicted the first nudes since classical times. Renaissance sculpture and architecture changed as well, displaying classical influences and motifs in pieces such as Donatello's David and Brunelleschi's dome in the cathedral in Florence. As a result of these advances, most Renaissance artists considered the realistic portrayal of their subjects to be the primary goal of art.

The status of Renaissance artists also rose over the course of the Renaissance. Early Renaissance artists, still regarded as artisans, usually began their careers as apprentices in craft guilds. By the 1500s, artists were regarded as geniuses and held much higher status than a typical craftsman.

#### AP Tip

Although there is an endless array of Renaissance artists, it is important to know the names and major works of some of the more famous ones. It is also important to be able to analyze the ways in which art of any time period is related to societal changes, using specific artists and their works as examples. You want to be prepared both to write intelligently about Renaissance art and to answer multiple-choice questions on the topic.

### The Renaissance Church

The power and credibility of the church were irreversibly damaged by the time of the Renaissance. During the 14th century, the Great Schism and calls for reform by religious leaders, such as John Hus and John Wyclif, provoked the questioning of Church teachings and attacks on its corruption and unbridled power. Despite the Church's efforts to stifle heretics, clean up abuses within itself, and resolve conflicts – for example, the papal crisis resolved by the Council of Constance – the erosion of confidence in the Church continued, furthered by the

secular and political actions of some Renaissance popes. As a result, many humanist scholars no longer took the Church's admonitions concerning their intellectual activities as seriously as they once might have. The political, economic, religious, and social trends of the Renaissance combined with the breakdown of the Church eventually led to the Protestant Reformation.