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Italy: Birthplace of the Renaissance

Terms & Names

- Renaissance
- humanism
- secular
- patron
- perspective
- vernacular

Main Idea

The European Renaissance, a rebirth of learning and the arts, began in Italy in the 1300s.

Setting the Stage

During the late Middle Ages, Europeans suffered from both war and plague. Those who survived wanted to enjoy life. As a result, they questioned the Church, which taught Christians to endure suffering to get a heavenly reward. They also questioned the structures of medieval society, which blocked social advancement. Educated people gradually began to reject medieval values and look to the classical past for ideas.

Why It Matters Now

Renaissance ideas about classical studies, art, and literature still influences modern thought.



Drawings of Renaissance Clothing, Artist Unknown

Italy's Advantages

The years 1300 to 1600 saw an explosion of creativity in Europe. Historians call this period the **Renaissance** (REHN•ih•SAHNS). The term means rebirth—in this case a rebirth of art and learning. The Renaissance began in northern Italy around 1300 and later spread north. One reason northern Europe lagged behind is that France and England were locked in the Hundred Years' War. Italy also had three advantages that fostered the Renaissance: thriving cities, a wealthy merchant class, and the classical heritage of Greece and Rome.

Urban Centers

Overseas trade, spurred by the Crusades, had led to the growth of large city-states in northern Italy. The region also had many sizable towns. Thus, northern Italy was urban while the rest of Europe was still mostly rural. Since cities are often places where people exchange new ideas, they were an ideal breeding ground for an intellectual revolution. The bubonic plague struck these cities hard, killing up to 60 percent of the population. This brought economic changes. Because there were fewer laborers, survivors could demand higher wages. In addition, the reduced population shrank opportunities for business expansion. Wealthy merchants began to pursue other interests, such as art.

Merchants and the Medici Milan

Florence, and other Italian city-states ran their own affairs. Each collected taxes and had its own army. Because city-states were relatively small, a high percentage of citizens could be intensely involved in political life. Merchants were the wealthiest, most powerful class, and they dominated politics. Unlike nobles, merchants did not inherit social rank. Success in business depended mostly on their own wits. As a result, many successful merchants believed they deserved power and wealth because of their individual merit. Individual achievement was to become an important Renaissance theme. Florence came under the rule of one powerful family, the Medici (MEHD•ih•chee). They had made a fortune in trade and banking. Cosimo de' Medici was the wealthiest European of his time. In 1434, he won control of Florence's government. He did not seek political office for himself, but instead influenced members of the ruling council by giving them loans. For 30 years, he was virtually dictator of Florence. Cosimo de' Medici died in 1464, but his family retained control of Florence. His grandson, Lorenzo de' Medici, came into power in 1469. He became known as Lorenzo the Magnificent. Like his grandfather, Lorenzo ruled as a dictator yet kept up the appearance of having an elected government. Although the Medici did not foster true republican government, they aided the Renaissance by supporting the arts.



SpotlightOn

Other Renaissances

A Renaissance can be a rebirth of the arts and learning at any time in history. For example, the Tang (618–907) and Song (960–1279) dynasties in China oversaw a period of great artistic and technological advances. Like the Italian Renaissance, the achievements of the Tang and the Song had roots in an earlier time—the Han Dynasty (202 B.C. to A.D. 220). After the Han collapsed, China experienced turmoil. When order was restored, Chinese culture flourished. The Chinese invented gunpowder and printing. The most famous Chinese poets of all time wrote literary masterpieces. Breakthroughs were made in architecture, painting, and pottery. In many ways, the Tang and Song period was a true Renaissance.



Background

Florence lost up to 55,000 out of a population of 85,000.

Classical Heritage

Renaissance scholars looked down on the art and literature of the Middle Ages and wanted to return to the learning of the Greeks and Romans. One reason the Renaissance began in Italy is that artists and scholars drew inspiration from the ruins of Rome that surrounded them. In the 1300s, scholars studied ancient Latin manuscripts, which had been preserved in monasteries. Then, when Constantinople fell to the Ottoman Turks in 1453, Byzantine scholars fled to Rome with ancient Greek manuscripts—which Italian scholars had assumed were lost forever.

Classical and Worldly Values

As scholars studied these Greek works, they became increasingly influenced by classical ideas. These ideas helped them to develop a new outlook on life, which had several characteristics.

Classics Lead to Humanism

The study of classical texts led to **humanism**, which focused on human potential and achievements. Instead of trying to make classical texts agree with Christian teaching as medieval scholars had, humanists studied them to understand ancient Greek values. Humanists influenced artists and architects to carry on classical traditions. In addition, humanists popularized the study of subjects common to classical education, such as history, literature, and philosophy. These subjects are called the humanities.

Enjoyment of Worldly Pleasures

In the Middle Ages, some religious people had proved their piety by wearing rough clothing and eating the plainest foods. However, humanists suggested that a person might enjoy life without offending God. In Renaissance Italy, the wealthy openly enjoyed material luxuries, fine music, and tasty foods. Most people remained devout Catholics. However, the basic spirit of Renaissance society was **secular**—worldly and concerned with the here and now. Even church leaders became more worldly. They lived in beautiful mansions, threw lavish banquets, and wore expensive clothes.

Patrons of the Arts

In addition to seeking pleasure, Renaissance popes beautified Rome by spending huge amounts of money for art. They became **patrons** of the arts by financially supporting artists. Renaissance merchants also were patrons of the arts. Wealthy families such as the Medici generously supported artists. By having their portraits painted or by donating public art to the city, the wealthy demonstrated their own importance.

The Renaissance Woman

According to *The Courtier*, upper-class women should know the classics and be charming. Yet they were not expected to seek fame. They were expected to inspire art but rarely to create it. Upper-class Renaissance women were far better educated

ThinkThroughHistory

A. Making Inferences Why
Do you suppose Cosimo de' Medici preferred to rule from behind the scenes rather than openly?

ThinkThroughHistory

B. Analyzing
Causes What were the three advantages that caused the Renaissance to start in Italy?



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Medici Family

Giant banks with branches in many cities are nothing new. The Medici bank had branch offices not only throughout Italy but also in the major cities of Europe. A rival family grew so jealous of the Medici that they plotted to kill Lorenzo (see bust below) and his brother Giuliano. As the Medici attended Mass, assassins murdered Giuliano at the altar. Drawing his sword, Lorenzo escaped to a small room and held off his attackers until help arrived. Then he had the killers brutally, publicly executed. More positively, Lorenzo was a generous patron of the arts who collected many rare manuscripts. Eventually the Medici family made their library available to the public.

than the women of the Middle Ages. However, most Renaissance women had less influence than medieval women had. A few women, such as Isabella d'Este, did exercise power. Born into the ruling family of the city-state of Ferrara, she married the ruler of another city-state, Mantua. She brought many Renaissance artists to her court and acquired an art collection that was famous throughout Europe. She was also skilled in politics. When her husband was taken captive in war, she defended Mantua and won his release.

The Renaissance Man

Renaissance writers first introduced the idea that some people were artistic geniuses. Though genius was rare, all educated people were expected to create art. In fact, the ideal individual strove to master almost every area of study. A man who excelled in many fields was praised as a “universal man.” Later ages called such people “Renaissance men.” A book called *The Courtier* (1528) by Baldassare Castiglione (KAHS•teel•YOH•nay) taught how to become such a person. A young man, said Castiglione, should be charming, witty, and well educated in the classics. He should dance, sing, play music, and write poetry. In addition, he should be a skilled rider, wrestler, and swordsman. Above all, he should have self-control:

A Voice From the Past



Let the man we are seeking be very bold, stern, and always among the first, where the enemy are to be seen; and in every other place, gentle, modest, reserved, above all things avoiding ostentation [showiness] and that impudent [bold] self-praise by which men ever excite hatred and disgust in all who hear them.

BALDASSARE CASTIGLIONE, *The Courtier*

A portrait of Baldassare Castiglione

Renaissance Revolutionizes Art

Supported by patrons like Isabella d'Este, dozens of talented artists worked in northern Italy. As the Renaissance advanced, artistic styles changed. Medieval artists used religious subjects and tried to convey a spiritual ideal. Renaissance artists also often portrayed religious subjects, but they used a realistic style copied from classical models. Greek and Roman subjects also became popular. Following the new emphasis on individuals, painters began to paint prominent citizens. These realistic portraits revealed what was distinctive about each person. In addition, artists such as the sculptor and painter Michelangelo (MY•kuhl•AN•juh•LOH) glorified the human body.

New Techniques: Donatello

(DAH•uh•TEHL•oh) made sculpture more realistic by carving natural posture and expressions that reveal personality. He revived a classical form by carving the statue David. It was the first European sculpture of a large, free-standing nude



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Leonardo Da Vinci

1452–1519

Leonardo da Vinci's notebooks—and life—are mysterious in many ways. Some 3,500 pages closely covered with writings and drawings survive, but these may be only one-fourth of what Leonardo produced. His writing is clear and easy to read—but only if you look at it in a mirror. He wrote backwards in “mirror-writing.” No one knows why he took the time to do this. Leonardo planned scholarly works that he never wrote, and he planned great feats of engineering that were never built. Only 17 of his paintings survive, and several of those were unfinished. The drawing above is the only self-portrait known to exist. And yet the work that Leonardo did produce is amazing. His reputation as one of the world's geniuses is secure.

ThinkThroughHistory

C. Synthesizing

Merchants believed in their own individual merit. How did this belief affect artistic styles?

Background

The words humanist and humanities come from the Latin word *humanitas*, which referred to the literary culture that every educated person should know.

HISTORY THROUGH ART: Renaissance Art

Michelangelo, Renaissance Artist

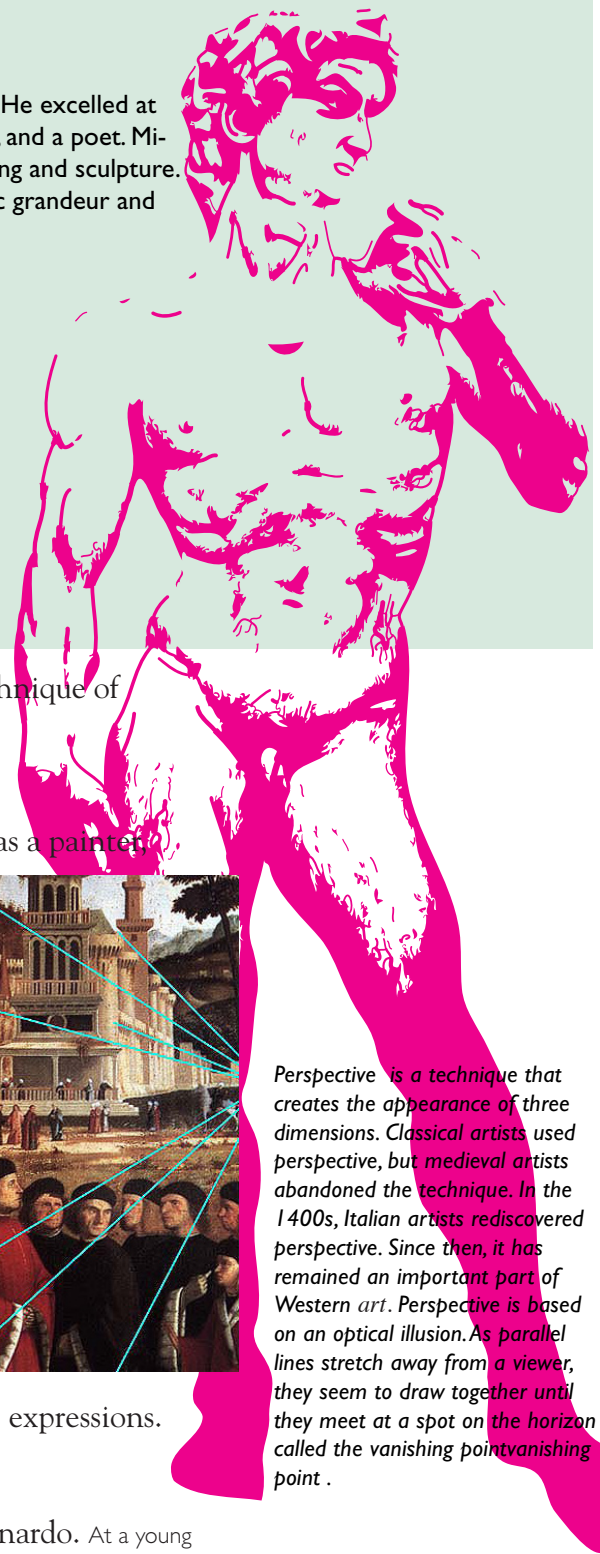
Like Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo Buonarroti was a true Renaissance man. He excelled at almost every area of study. Michelangelo was a painter, a sculptor, an architect, and a poet. Michelangelo is most famous for the way he portrayed the human body in painting and sculpture. Influenced by classical art, he created figures that are forceful and show heroic grandeur and power. By doing this, he explored the Renaissance theme of human potential.

David

Influenced by classical statues, Michelangelo sculpted David from 1501 to 1504. Michelangelo portrayed the Biblical hero in the moments just before battle. His posture is graceful, yet his figure also displays strength. The statue, which is 18 feet tall, towers over the viewer. This conveys a sense of power.

Sistine Chapel

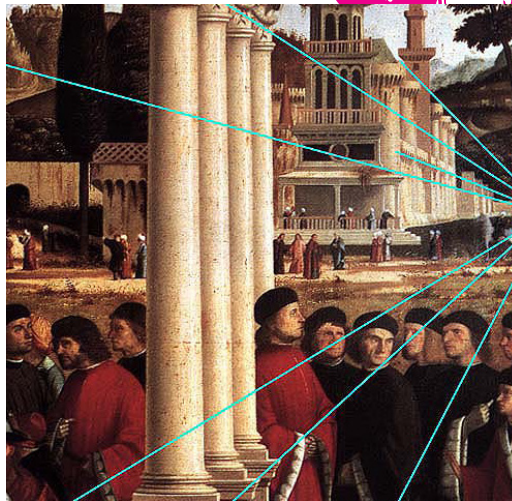
From 1508 to 1512, Michelangelo painted the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Rome. This detail shows the Biblical prophet Joel. Many of the panels show classical influences, such as the two youths who stand behind Joel instead of angels. Like many Renaissance artists, Michelangelo blended Christian and Greek ideals.



since ancient times. Renaissance artists, also rediscovered the technique of **perspective**, which indicates three dimensions.

Leonardo, Renaissance Man

Leonardo da Vinci (LAY•uh•NAHR•dohduh•VIHN•chee) was a painter, sculptor, inventor, and scientist. A true “Renaissance man,” he was deeply interested in how things worked. He studied how a muscle moves or how veins are arranged in a leaf. He filled his notebooks with observations and sketches of new inventions, and he incorporated his findings in his art. Among his many masterpieces, Leonardo painted one of the best-known portraits in the world, the Mona Lisa. The woman in the portrait seems so real that many writers have tried to explain the thoughts behind her slight smile. Leonardo also produced a famous religious painting, The Last Supper. It shows the personalities of Jesus’ disciples through facial expressions.



Perspective is a technique that creates the appearance of three dimensions. Classical artists used perspective, but medieval artists abandoned the technique. In the 1400s, Italian artists rediscovered perspective. Since then, it has remained an important part of Western art. Perspective is based on an optical illusion. As parallel lines stretch away from a viewer, they seem to draw together until they meet at a spot on the horizon called the vanishing point.

Raphael Advances Realism

Raphael (RAF•ee•uhl) was younger than Michelangelo and Leonardo. At a young age, Raphael went to study with a painter named Perugino. He stayed there about ten years and then went to Florence. He learned from studying their works. One of Raphael’s favorite subjects was the Madonna and child. Raphael often portrayed

their expressions as gentle and calm. In his greatest achievement, Raphael filled the walls of Pope Julius II's library with several paintings. One of these, *School of Athens* (page 414), conveys the classical influence of the Renaissance. It shows classical and Renaissance figures together. Listening to Greek philosophers are Raphael and Michelangelo, among others. Because oil paint does not dry quickly, it can be blended more easily than other paints. By applying layer upon layer of paint he was able to create a variety of subtle colors in clothing and jewels. Among his many masterpieces, Leonardo painted one of the best-known portraits in the world, the *Mona Lisa*. The woman in the portrait seems so real that many writers have tried to explain the thoughts behind her slight smile. Leonardo also produced a famous religious painting, *The Last Supper*. It shows the personalities of Jesus' disciples through facial expressions.

Women Painters

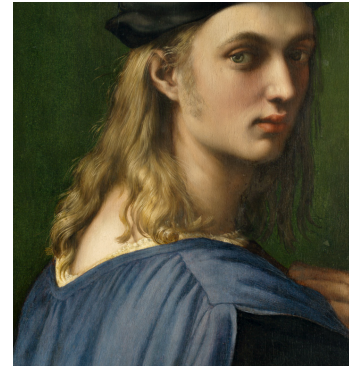
Although Renaissance society generally restricted women's roles, a few Italian women became painters. Sofonisba Anguissola (ahng•GWEES•soh•lah) was the first woman artist to gain an international reputation. She is known for portraits of her sisters and of people such as King Phillip II of Spain. Artemisia Gentileschi (JAYN•tee•LEHS•kee) trained with her painter father and helped with his work. In her own paintings, Gentileschi painted pictures of strong, heroic women.

Renaissance Writers Change Literature

Renaissance writers produced works that not only reflected their time, but also used techniques that writers rely on today. Some followed the example of the medieval writer Dante. He wrote in the **vernacular**, his native language, instead of classical Latin. In addition, Renaissance writers wrote either for self-expression or to portray the individuality of their subjects. In these ways, writers of the Renaissance began trends that modern writers still follow.

Petrarch and Boccaccio

Francesco Petrarch (PEE•trahrk) was one of the earliest and most influential humanists. He was also a great poet. Petrarch wrote both in Italian and in Latin. In Italian, he wrote sonnets—14-line poems. They were about a mysterious woman named Laura, who was his ideal. (Little is known of Laura except that she died of the plague in 1348.) In classical Latin, he wrote letters to his many important friends. The Italian writer Boccaccio (boh•KAH•chee•oh) is best known for the *Decameron*, a series of realistic, sometimes off-color stories. The stories are supposedly told by a group of worldly young people waiting in a villa to avoid the plague sweeping through Florence. The humor of the *Decameron* is cutting. Boccaccio presents the follies of his characters—and all humans—with some sarcasm.



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Raphael

1483–1520

One of the artists influenced by Leonardo, Raphael began his career early. His father, Giovanni Santi, was a painter, and Raphael learned the basics of his art in his father's studio. At a young age, Raphael went to study with a painter named Perugino. He stayed there about ten years and then went to Florence. In 1508, Raphael was asked by Pope Julius II to work for him in Rome. Raphael created a series of magnificent frescoes, paintings done on wet plaster, for the pope's private rooms in the Vatican. Raphael, unlike many of his fellow artists, was easy to like.

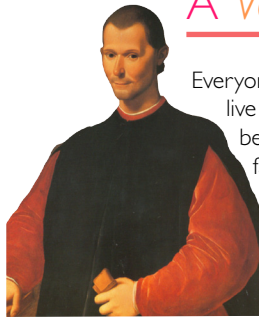
Background

Madonna: a term for Mary, the mother of Jesus; it comes from a former Italian title for women, meaning "my lady."

Machiavelli Advises Rulers

The Prince (1513), by Niccolò Machiavelli (MAK•ee•uh•VEHL•ee), also examines the imperfect conduct of human beings. He does so in the form of a political guidebook. In The Prince, Machiavelli examines how a ruler can gain power and keep it in spite of his enemies. In answering this question, he began with the idea that most people are selfish, fickle, and corrupt.

To succeed in such a wicked world, Machiavelli said, a prince must be strong as a lion and shrewd as a fox. He might have to trick his enemies and even his own people for the good of the state. In The Prince, Machiavelli was not concerned with what was morally right, but with what was politically effective:



A Voice From the past

Everyone admits how praiseworthy it is in a prince to keep faith, and to live with integrity and not with craft. Nevertheless our experience has been that those princes who have done great things have held good faith of little account, and have known how to circumvent the intellect of men by craft, and in the end have overcome those who have relied on their word.

Machiavelli, the Prince

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D. Supporting Opinions

Do you think Machiavelli is right in his view that rulers must trick people and ignore morality? Explain.

Women Writers

The women writers who gained fame in the Renaissance usually wrote about personal subjects, not politics. Yet, some of them had great influence. Vittoria Colonna exchanged sonnets with Michelangelo and helped Castiglione publish The Courtier. Her own poems are often very personal. For example, when her husband was away at war, she wrote to him, “Your uncertain enterprises do not hurt you; / but we who wait, mournfully grieving, / are wounded by doubt and fear.” Toward the end of the 15th century, Renaissance ideas began to spread north from Italy to countries such as France, Germany, and England. Northern artists and thinkers would adapt the Renaissance ideals in their own ways.

Background

During most of the Middle Ages, educated Europeans wrote everything in Latin.

Section One Assignments

I. Terms & Names

Identify

- Renaissance • humanism
- secular • patron • perspective
- vernacular

2. Taking Notes

Using a big-idea outline like the one below, record the main ideas from the section about the Italian Renaissance.

- Italy's advantages
 -
 -
 -
- Classical and worldly values

3. Supporting Opinions

Name three people from this section whom you regard as a “Renaissance man” or a “Renaissance woman.” and explain.

Think About

- the idea of the “universal man”
- Castiglione's description of such a person
- which people from this section seem to match that description

4. Analyzing Themes

How did the Renaissance revolutionize European art and thought?

Think About

- changes in ideas since medieval times
- changes in artistic techniques
- changes in artistic subjects
- Renaissance • humanism
- secular • patron • perspective
- vernacular

2

The Northern Renaissance

Terms & Names

- Utopia
- Printing Press
- Guttenberg Bible

Main Idea

In the 1400s, northern Europeans began to adapt the ideas of the Renaissance

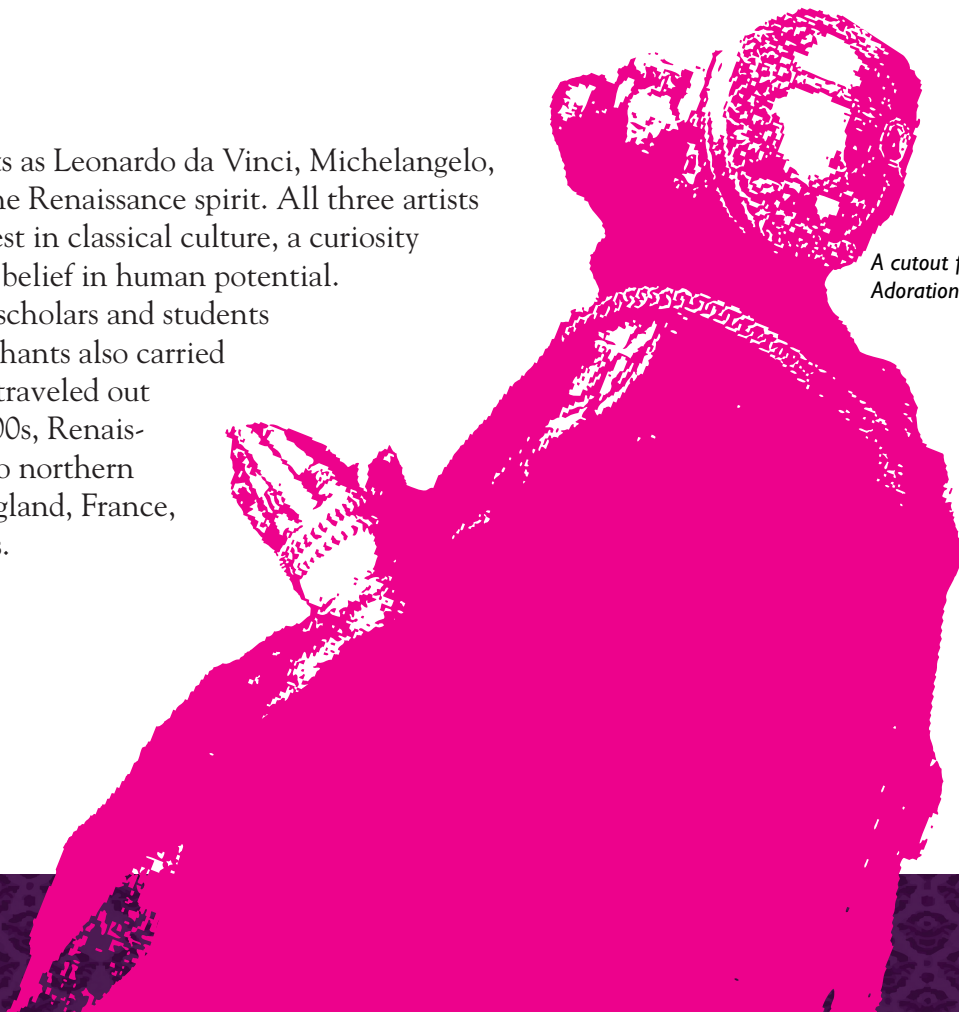
Why It Matters Now

Renaissance ideas such as the importance of the individual are a strong part of modern thought.

Setting the Stage

The work of such artists as Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, and Raphael showed the Renaissance spirit. All three artists demonstrated an interest in classical culture, a curiosity about the world, and a belief in human potential.

These ideas impressed scholars and students who visited Italy. Merchants also carried these ideas when they traveled out of Italy. By the late 1400s, Renaissance ideas had spread to northern Europe—especially England, France, Germany, and Flanders.



A cutout from a Albrecht Dürer's Adoration of the Trinity.

The Northern Renaissance Begins

By 1450 the population of northern Europe, which had been shattered by the bubonic plague, was beginning to recover. In addition, the destructive Hundred Years' War between France and England ended in 1453. Many cities grew rapidly. Urban merchants became wealthy enough to sponsor artists. This happened first in Flanders, which was rich from long-distance trade and the cloth industry. Then it happened in other countries. As Section 1 explained, Italy was divided into city-states. In contrast, England and France were unified under strong monarchs. These rulers often sponsored the arts. For example, Francis I of France purchased Renaissance paintings. He also invited Leonardo da Vinci to retire in France, and hired Italian artists and architects to rebuild his castle at Fontainebleau (FAHN•tih•BLOH). When completed, Fontainebleau became a showcase of the French Renaissance. Because of monarchs like Francis, royal courts played a major role in introducing Renaissance styles to northern Europe. As Renaissance ideas spread out of Italy, they mingled with northern traditions. As a result, the northern Renaissance developed its own character. Many humanists there were more interested in religious ideas than in the secular themes popular in Italy. The Renaissance ideal of human dignity inspired some northern humanists to develop plans for social reform based on Christian values.

Artistic Ideas Spread

In 1494, a French king claimed the throne of Naples in southern Italy and launched an invasion through northern Italy. As the war dragged on, many Italian artists and writers left for a safer life in northern Europe.

Albrecht Dürer painted this after returning from study in Italy.



With them, they brought the styles and techniques of the Renaissance. In addition, artists who studied in Italy also carried Renaissance ideas north.

German Painters

Perhaps the most famous person to do this was the German artist Albrecht Dürer (DYUR•uhr). The son of a goldsmith, Dürer decided to become a painter. After serving an apprenticeship, he traveled to Italy to study in 1494. After returning to Germany, Dürer produced woodcuts and engravings that became influential. Others portray classical myths. He also painted realistic landscapes and a self-portrait in which he portrayed himself as a Renaissance

Background

Flanders was a region in northern Europe. It included part of France and part of the Netherlands. The people of Flanders are the Flemish.



Fontainebleau

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A. Analyzing Causes

How did the war in Italy help spread the Renaissance?

DailyLife

Flemish Peasant Life

The Flemish painter Pieter Bruegel often portrayed peasants. Many of his paintings provide information about peasant life in the 1500s. Peasant Wedding (1568), shown below, portrays a wedding feast in a rough but clean barn. The bride sits under the paper crown hanging on a piece of green cloth. Two young men who may be her brothers are pouring drinks and passing out plates. Who, then, is the groom? Possibly the man sitting across the table from the bride and leaning back on a three-legged stool. Children and at least one dog have come to the party. The couple to the right of the bride and the man on the far right with a sword are dressed more elegantly than the other guests. They may be wealthy townsmen related to the groom.



sance man. The popularity of Dürer's work helped to spread Renaissance styles. His work inspired other German artists. Dürer's emphasis upon realism influenced the work of another German artist, Hans Holbein (HOHL•byn) the Younger. Holbein specialized in painting portraits that are almost photographic in detail. He enjoyed great success in England, where he painted portraits of King Henry VIII and other members of the royal family

Flemish Painters

As in Italy, wealthy merchant families in Flanders were attracted to the Renaissance emphasis on individualism and worldly pleasures. Their patronage helped to make Flanders the artistic center of northern Europe. As in Italy, the Renaissance in Flanders was marked by an interest in realism. The first great Flemish Renaissance painter was Jan van Eyck (yahnvayk). Van Eyck lived from sometime in the late 1300s to 1441 and worked at the height of the Italian Renaissance. Oil-based paints had recently been developed. Van Eyck used them to develop techniques that painters still use. Because oil paint does not dry quickly, it can be blended more easily than other paints. By applying layer upon layer of paint, van Eyck was able to create a variety of subtle colors in clothing and jewels. Oil painting became popular and spread to Italy. the ideal of humanism. However, some gave it a more religious slant. Because of this, Some northern humanists are also called Christian humanists.

ThinkThroughHistory

B. Contrasting

How did the war in Italy help spread the Renaissance?

A famous work by Jan van Eyck

