

# Chapter 4: The Renaissance: Art and Learning

## Humanism

The starting point with studying the Renaissance is just learning what the word means: rebirth. But what was being reborn? The answer is the culture and ideas of classical Europe, ancient Greece and Rome. Renaissance thinkers and artists very consciously made the claim that they were reviving long-lost traditions from the classical world in areas as diverse as scholarship, poetry, architecture, and sculpture. The feeling among most Renaissance thinkers and artists was that the ancient Greeks and Romans had achieved truly incredible things, things that had not been, and possibly could never be, surpassed. Much of the Renaissance began as an attempt to mimic or copy Greek and Roman art and scholarship (corresponding to one another in classical Latin, for example), but over the decades the more outstanding Renaissance thinkers struck out on new paths of their own - still inspired by the classics, but seeking to be creators in their own right as well.

Of the various themes of Renaissance thought, perhaps the most important was humanism, an ancient intellectual paradigm that emphasized both the beauty and the centrality of humankind in the universe. Humanists held that humankind was inherently rational, beautiful, and noble, rather than debased, wicked, or weak. They sought to celebrate the beauty of the human body in their art, of the human mind and human achievements in their scholarship, and of human society in the elegance of their architectural design. Humanism was, among other things, an optimistic attitude toward artistic and intellectual possibility that cited the achievements of the ancient world as proof that humankind was the crowning achievement of God's creation.

Renaissance humanism was the root of some very modern notions of individuality, along with some specific phenomena such as the idea that education ought to arrive at a well-rounded individual. The goal of education in the Renaissance was to realize as much of the human potential as possible with a robust education in diverse disciplines. This was a true, meaningful change over medieval forms of learning in that education's major purpose was no longer believed to be the clarification of religious questions or better intellectual support for religious

orthodoxy; the point of education was to create a more competent and well-rounded person instead.

Along with the idea of a well-rounded individual, Renaissance thinkers championed the idea of Civic Humanism: one's moral and ethical standing was tied to devotion to one's city. This was a Greek and Roman concept that the great Renaissance thinker Petrarch championed in particular. Here, the Medici of Florence are the ultimate example: there was a tremendous effort on the part of the rich and powerful to invest in the city in the form of building projects and art. This was tied to the prestige of the family, of course, but it was also a heartfelt dedication to one's home, analogous to the present-day concept of patriotism.

Practically speaking, there was a shift in the practical business of education from medieval scholasticism, which focused on law, medicine, and theology, to disciplines related to business and politics. Renaissance learning was born in the cities of northern Italy because of the wealth of northern Italy. Princes and other elites wanted skilled bureaucrats to staff their merchant empires; they needed literate men with a knowledge of law and mathematics, even if they themselves were not merchants. City governments began educating children (girls and boys alike, at least in certain cities like Florence) directly, along with the role played by private tutors. These schools and tutors emphasized practical education: rhetoric, math, and history. Thus, one of the major effects of the Italian Renaissance was that this new form of education, usually referred to as "humanistic education" spread from Italy to the rest of Europe by the late fifteenth century. By the sixteenth century, a broad cross-section of European elites, including nobles, merchants, and priests, were educated in the humanistic tradition.

A "Renaissance man" (note that there *were* important female thinkers as well, but the term "Renaissance man" was used exclusively for men) was a man who cultivated classical virtues, which were not quite the same as Christian ones: understanding, benevolence, compassion, fortitude, judgment, eloquence, and honor, among others. Drawing from the work of thinkers like Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and Virgil, Renaissance thinkers came to support the idea of a virtuous life that was not the same thing as a specifically *Christian* virtuous life. And, importantly, it was possible to become a good person simply through studying the classics – all of the major figures of the Renaissance were Christians, but they insisted that one's moral status could and should be shaped by emulation of the ancient virtues, combined with Christian piety. While the Renaissance case for the debasement of medieval culture was overstated - medieval intellectual life prospered during the High Middle Ages, there was definitely a distinct kind of intellectual courage and optimism that came out of the return to classical models over medieval ones during the Renaissance.

## Important Thinkers

The Renaissance is remembered primarily for its great thinkers and artists, with some exceptional individuals (like Leonardo da Vinci) being renowned as both. What Renaissance thinkers had in common was that they embraced the ideals of humanism and used humanism as their inspiration for creating innovative new approaches to philosophy, philology (the study of language), theology, history, and political theory. In other words, reading the classics inspired Renaissance thinkers to emulate the great writers and philosophers of ancient Greece and Rome, creating poetry, philosophy, and theory on par with that of an Aristotle or a Cicero. Some of the most noteworthy included the following.

### Dante (1265 - 1321)

Durante degli Alighieri, better remembered as Dante, was a major figure who anticipated the Renaissance rather than being alive during most of it (while there is no “official” start to the Renaissance, the life of Petrarch, described below, lends itself to using 1300 as a convenient date). Experiencing what would later be called a mid-life crisis, Dante turned to poetry to console himself, ultimately producing the greatest written work of the late Middle Ages: *The Divine Comedy*. Written in his own native dialect, the Tuscan of the city of Florence, *The Divine Comedy* describes Dante’s descent into hell, guided by the spirit of the classical Roman poet Virgil. Dante and Virgil emerge on the other side of the earth, with Dante ascending the mountain of purgatory and ultimately entering heaven, where he enters into the divine presence.

Dante’s work, which soon became justly famous in Italy and then elsewhere in Europe, presaged some of the essential themes of Renaissance thought. Dante’s travels through hell, purgatory, and heaven in the poem are replete with encounters with two categories of people: Italians of Dante’s lifetime or the recent past, and both real and mythical figures from ancient Greece and Rome. In other words, Dante was indifferent to the entire period of the Middle Ages, concentrating instead on what he imagined the spiritual fate of the great thinkers and heroes of the classical age would have been (and gleefully relegating Italians he hated to infernal torments). Ultimately, his work became so famous that it established Tuscan as the basis of what would eventually become the language of “Italian” in so many words - all educated people in Italy would eventually come to read the *Comedy* as a matter of course and it came to serve as the founding document of the modern Italian language in the process.

### Petrarch (1304 – 1374)

Francesco Petrarca, known as Petrarch in English, was in many ways the founding father of the Renaissance. Like Dante, he was a Florentine (native of the city of Florence) and single-handedly spearheaded the practice of studying and imitating the great writers and thinkers of the past. Petrarch personally rediscovered long-lost works by Cicero, widely considered the greatest writer of ancient Rome during the republican period, and set about training himself to emulate Cicero's rhetorical style. Petrarch wrote to friends and associates in a classical, grammatically spotless Latin (as opposed to the often sloppy and error-ridden Latin of the Middle Ages) and encouraged them to learn to emulate the classics in their writing, thought, and values. He went on to write many works of poetry and prose that were based on the model provided by Cicero and other ancient writers.

Petrarch was responsible for coming up with the very idea of the "Dark Ages" that had separated his own era from the greatness of the classical past. His own poetry and writings became so popular among other educated people that he deserves a great deal of personal credit for sparking the Renaissance itself; following Petrarch, the idea that the classical world might be "reborn" in northern Italy acquired a great deal of popularity and cultural force.

### Christine de Pizan (1364 - 1430)

Christine de Pizan was the most famous and important woman thinker and writer of the Renaissance era. Her father, the court astrologer of the French king Charles V, was exceptional in that he felt it important that his daughter receive the same quality of education afforded to elite men at the time. She went on to become a famous poet and writer in her own right, being patronized (i.e. receiving commissions for her writing) by a wide variety of French and Italian nobles. Her best-known work was *The Book of the City of Ladies*, in which she attacked the then-universal idea that women were naturally unintelligent, sinful, and irrational. Instead, she argued, history provided a vast catalog of women who had been moral, pious, intelligent, and competent, and that it was men's pride and the refusal of men to allow women to be properly educated that held women back. In many ways, the *City of Ladies* was the first truly feminist work in European history, and it is striking that she was supported by, and listened to by, elite men due to her obvious intellectual gifts despite their own deep-seated sexism.



*In the illustration above, Christine de Pizan presents a copy of The City of Ladies to a French noblewoman, Margaret of Burgundy. The illustration itself is in the pre-Renaissance “Gothic” style, without linear perspective, despite its approximate date of 1475. This is one example of the relatively slow spread of Renaissance-inspired artistic innovations.*

### Desiderius Erasmus (1466 - 1536)

Erasmus was an astonishingly erudite priest who benefited from both the traditional scholastic education of the late-medieval church and the new humanistic style that emerged from the Renaissance. Of his various talents, one of the most important was his mastery of philology: the history of languages. Erasmus became completely fluent not just in classical and medieval Latin, but in the Greek of the New Testament (i.e. most of the earliest versions of the New Testament of the Bible are written in the vernacular Greek of the first century CE). He also became conversant in Hebrew, which was very uncommon among Christians at the time.



*In the above well-known portrait of Erasmus, he is depicted in heavy, fur-lined robes and hat, a necessity even when indoors in Northern Europe for much of the year. Realistic portraiture was another major innovation of the Renaissance period.*

Armed with his lingual virtuosity, Erasmus undertook a vast study and re-translation of the New Testament, working from various versions of the Greek originals and correcting the Latin Vulgate that was the most widely used version at the time. In the process, Erasmus corrected the New Testament itself, catching and fixing numerous translation errors (while he did not re-translate the Old Testament from the Hebrew, he did point out errors in it as well).

Erasmus was criticized by some of his superiors within the Church because he was not officially authorized to carry out his studies and translations; nevertheless, he ended up producing an extensively notated re-translation of the New Testament with numerous corrections. Importantly, these corrections were not just a question of grammatical issues, but

of *meaning*. The Christian message that emerged from the “correct” version of the New Testament was a deeply personal philosophy of prayer, devotion, and morality that did not correspond to many of the structures and practices of the Latin Church. He was also an advocate of translations of the Bible into vernacular languages, although he did not produce such a translation himself.

Some of his other works other included *In Praise of Folly*, a satirical attack on corruption within the church, and *Handbook of the Christian Soldier*, which de-emphasized the importance of the sacraments. Erasmus used his abundant wit to ridicule sterile medieval-style scholastic scholars, the corruption of “Christian” rulers who were essentially glorified warlords, and even the very idea of witches, which he demonstrated relied on a faulty translation from the Hebrew of the Old Testament.

### Niccolo Machiavelli (1469 – 1527)

Machiavelli was a "courtier," a professional politician, ambassador, and official who spent his life in the court of a ruler - in his case, as part of the city government of his native Florence. While in Florence, Machiavelli wrote various works on politics, most notably a consideration of the proper functioning of a republic like Florence itself. Unfortunately for him, Machiavelli was caught up in the whirlwind of power politics at court and ended up being exiled by the Medici.

While in exile, Machiavelli undertook a new work of political theory which he titled *The Prince*. Here, Machiavelli detailed how an effective ruler should behave: training constantly in war, forcing his subjects to fear (but not hate) him, studying the ancient past for role models like Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar, and never wasting a moment worrying about morality when power was on the line. In the process, Machiavelli created what was arguably the first work of "political science" that abandoned the moralistic approach of how a ruler *should* behave as a good Christian and instead embraced a practical guide to holding power. He dedicated the work to the Medici in hopes that he would be allowed to return from exile (he detested the rural bumpkins he lived among in exile and longed to return to cosmopolitan Florence). Instead, *The Prince* caused a scandal when it came out for completely ignoring the role of God and Christian morality in politics, and Machiavelli died not long after. That being noted, Machiavelli is now remembered as a pioneering political thinker; it is safe to assume that far more rulers have consulted *The Prince* for ideas of how to maintain their power over the years than one of the moralistic tracts that was preferred during Machiavelli's lifetime.

## Baldassarre Castiglione (1478 - 1529)

Castiglione was the author of *The Courtier*, published at the end of his life in 1528. Whereas Machiavelli's *The Prince* was a practical guide for rulers, *The Courtier* was a guide to the nobles, wealthy merchants, high-ranking members of the church, and other social elites who served and schemed in the courts of princes: courtiers. The work centered on what was needed to win the prince's favor and to influence him, not just avoiding embarrassment at court. This was tied to the growing sense of what it was to be "civilized" – Italians at the time were renowned across Europe for their refinement, the quality of their dress and jewelry, their wit in conversation, and their good taste. The relatively crude tastes of the nobility of the Middle Ages were "revised" starting in Italy, with Castiglione serving as both a symptom and cause of this shift.

The effective courtier, according to Castiglione, was tasteful, educated, clever, and subtle in his actions and words, a true politician rather than merely a warrior who happened to have inherited some land. Going forward, growing numbers of political elites came to resemble a Castiglione-style courtier instead of a thuggish medieval knight or "man-at-arms." When he died, no less a personage than the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V lamented his loss and paid tribute to his memory.

## Art and Artists

Perhaps the most iconic aspect of the Renaissance as a whole is its tremendous artistic achievements - figures like Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo Buonarroti are household names in a way that Petrarch is not, despite the fact that Petrarch should be credited for creating the very concept of the Renaissance. The fame of Renaissance art is thanks to the incredible creativity of the great Renaissance artists themselves, who both imitated classical models of art and ultimately forged entirely new artistic paths of their own.

Medieval art (called "Gothic" after one of the barbarian tribes that had conquered the Roman Empire) had been unconcerned with realistic depictions of objects or people. Medieval paintings often presented things from several angles at once to the viewer and had no sense of three-dimensional perspective. Likewise, Gothic architecture tended to be bulky and overwhelming rather than refined and delicate; the great examples of Gothic architecture are undoubtedly the cathedrals built during the Middle Ages, often beautiful and inspiring but a far cry from the symmetrical, airy structures of ancient Greece and Rome.





*Another example of Gothic art. The artist, Lorenzo Monaco, painted during the Renaissance period, but the work was created before linear perspective had replaced the “two-dimensional” style of Gothic painting.*

In contrast, Renaissance artists studied and copied ancient frescoes and statues in an attempt to learn how to realistically depict people and objects. And, just as Petrarch “invented” the major themes of Renaissance thought by imitating and championing classical humanist thought, a Florentine artist, architect, and engineer named Filippo Brunelleschi “invented” Renaissance art through the imitation of the classical world.

### Filippo Brunelleschi (1377 - 1446)

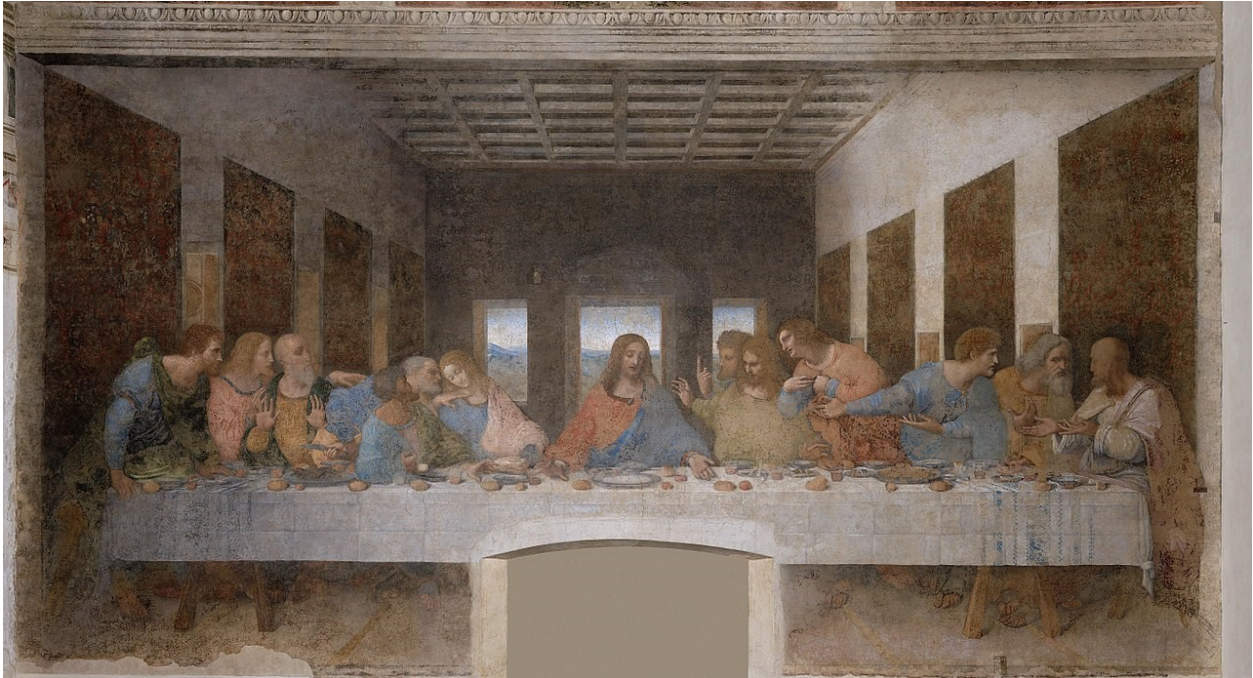
Brunelleschi was an astonishing artistic and engineering genius. He became a prominent client of the Medici, and with their political and financial support he undertook the construction of what would be the largest free-standing domed structure in all of Europe: the dome of the cathedral of Florence. For generations, the cathedral of Florence had stood unfinished, its main tower having been built too large and too tall for any architect to complete. Literally no one knew how to build a freestanding stone dome on top of a tower over

350 feet high. By studying ancient Roman structures and employing his own incredible intellect, Brunelleschi built the dome in such a way that it held its internal structure together during the construction process. He invented a giant, geared winch to raise huge blocks of sandstone hundreds of feet in the air and was even known to personally ascend the construction to place bricks. The dome was completed in 1413, crowning both his fame as an architect and the Medici's role as the greatest patrons of Renaissance art and architecture at the time.

While the dome is usually considered Brunelleschi's greatest achievement, he was also the inventor of one of the most important artistic concepts in history: linear perspective. He was the first person in the Western world to determine how to draw objects in two dimensions, on a piece of paper or the equivalent, in such a way that they looked realistically three-dimensional (i.e. having depth, as in looking off into the distance and seeing objects that are farther away "look smaller" than those nearby). Unlike other Renaissance innovations that had direct parallels in other cultures, like the study of ancient texts or a recognizably humanistic approach to philosophy, linear perspective does appear to be one truly unprecedented intellectual invention originating in Europe. This innovation spread rapidly and completely revolutionized the visual arts, resulting in far more realistic drawings and paintings.

### Leonardo da Vinci (1452 - 1519)

Da Vinci was famous in his own time as both one of the greatest painters of his age and as what we would now call a scientist – at the time, he was sought after for his skill at engineering, overseeing the construction of the naval defenses of Venice and swamp drainage projects in Rome at different points. He was hired by a whole swath of the rich and powerful in Italy and France; in his old age he was the official chief painter and engineer of the French king, living in a private chateau provided for him and receiving admiring visits from the king.



*Leonardo Da Vinci's The Last Supper. Note how the walls and ceiling tiles appear to slant downwards toward a point at the horizon behind Jesus (in the center). That imaginary point - the "vanishing point" - was one of the major artistic breakthroughs associated with linear perspective first discovered by Brunelleschi.*

Leonardo's most important "scientific" work at the time had to do with human anatomy. The church banned the dissection of corpses on religious grounds - the fear was that the soul needed a site to return to during the Second Coming of Christ at the end of the world, so human bodies were not to be tampered with. Da Vinci received special dispensation from the church to perform human dissections on the bodies of executed criminals, however, ostensibly to look for the physical organ that contained the soul. In fact, he was just interested in seeing how the body worked, and his anatomical drawings inspired new generations of physicians to learn how the body functioned based on empirical observation.



*One of Da Vinci's anatomical sketches, in this case examining the musculature of the shoulder and neck.*

Da Vinci is famous today thanks as much to his diagrams of things like flying machines as for his art. Ironically, while he was well known as a practical engineer at the time, no one had a clue that he was an inventor in the technological sense: he never built physical models of his ideas, and he never published his concepts, so they remained unknown until well after his death.

### Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475 - 1564)

Michelangelo was the most famous artist of the Renaissance during his own lifetime, patronized by the city council of Florence (run by the Medici) and the pope alike. He created numerous works, most famously the statue of the David and the paintings on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. The latter work took him four years of work, during which he argued constantly with the Pope, Julius II, who treated him like an artisan servant rather than the true artistic

genius Michelangelo knew himself to be. Michelangelo was already the most famous artist in Europe thanks to his sculptures. By the time he completed the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, he had to be accepted as one of the greatest painters of his age as well, not just the single most famous sculptor of the time.



*Michelangelo's David, completed in 1504 (it took three years to complete). The statue was meant to celebrate an ideal of masculine beauty, inspired by the example of Greek sculpture and by the work of an earlier Renaissance artist, Donatello.*

In the end, a biography of Michelangelo written by a friend helped cement the idea that there was an important distinction between mere artisans and true artists, the latter of whom were temperamental and mercurial but possessed of genius. Thus, the whole idea of the artist as a ingenious social outsider derives in part from Michelangelo's life.

## Conclusion

Renaissance art and scholarship was enormously influential. While the process took many decades, both humanist scholarship and education on the one hand and classically-inspired art and architecture on the other spread beyond Italy over the course of the fifteenth century. By the sixteenth century, the study of the classics became entrenched as an essential part of elite education itself, joining with (or rendering obsolete) medieval scholastic traditions in schools and universities. The beautiful and realistic styles of sculpture and painting spread as well, completely surpassing Gothic artistic forms, just as Renaissance architecture replaced the Gothic style of building. Along with the political and technological innovations described in the following chapters, Renaissance learning and art helped bring about the definitive end of the Middle Ages.

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