

The Italian Renaissance

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The statue of David by Michelangelo. During the Renaissance, artists and thinkers looked back at Greek and Roman culture. They studied the human mind and body. Photo by: Jörg Bittner Unna/Wikimedia.

Toward the end of the 14th century A.D., a handful of Italian thinkers declared that they were living in a new age. The barbarous, unenlightened “Middle Ages” were over, they said; the new age would be a “rinascità” (“rebirth”) of learning and literature, art and culture. This was the birth of the period now known as the Renaissance. For centuries, scholars have agreed that the Italian Renaissance (another word for “rebirth”) happened just that way: that between the 14th century and the 17th century, a new, modern way of thinking about the world and man’s place in it replaced an old, backward one. In fact, the Renaissance (in Italy and in other parts of Europe) was considerably more complicated than that: For one thing, in many ways the period we call the Renaissance was not so different from the era that preceded it. However, many of the scientific, artistic and cultural achievements of the so-called Renaissance do share common themes – most notably the humanistic belief that man was the center of his own universe.

The Italian Renaissance in context



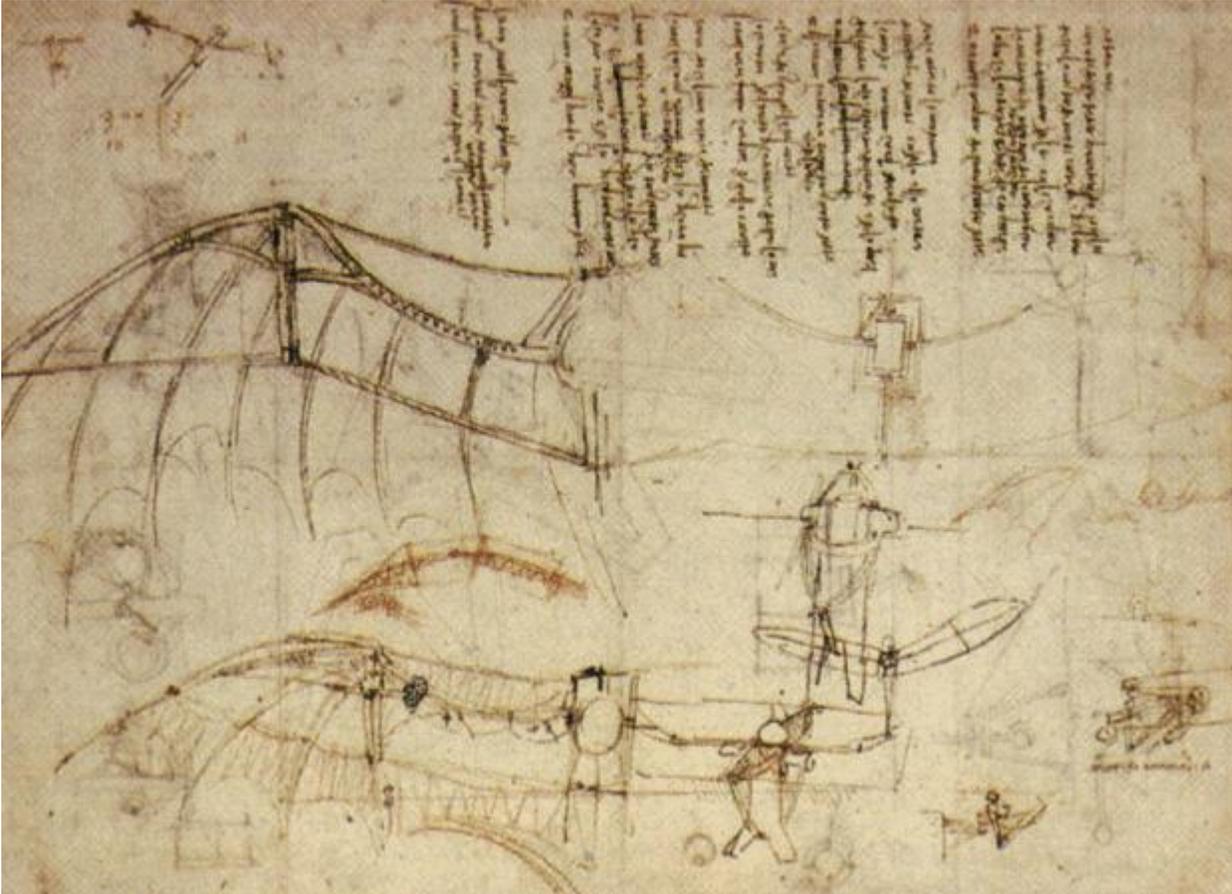
Fifteenth-century Italy was unlike any other place in Europe. It was divided into independent city-states, each with a different form of government. Florence, where the Italian Renaissance began, was an independent republic. It was also a banking and commercial capital and, after London and Constantinople, the third-largest city in Europe. Wealthy Florentines flaunted their money and power by becoming patrons, or supporters, of artists and intellectuals. In this way, the city became the cultural center of Europe, and of the Renaissance.

The new humanism, cornerstone of the Renaissance

Thanks to the patronage of these wealthy elites, Renaissance-era writers and thinkers were able to spend their days doing just that. Instead of devoting themselves to ordinary jobs or to the asceticism of the monastery, they could enjoy worldly pleasures. They traveled around Italy, studying ancient ruins and rediscovering Greek and Roman texts.

To Renaissance scholars and philosophers, these classical sources held great wisdom. Their secularism, their appreciation of physical beauty and especially their emphasis on man's own achievements and expression formed the governing intellectual principle of the Italian Renaissance. This philosophy is known as "humanism."

Renaissance science and technology



Humanism encouraged people to be curious and to question received wisdom (particularly that of the medieval Church). It also encouraged people to use experimentation and observation to solve earthly problems. As a result, many Renaissance intellectuals focused on trying to define and understand the laws of nature and the physical world. For example, Renaissance artist Leonardo Da Vinci created detailed scientific “studies” of objects ranging from flying machines to submarines. He also created pioneering studies of human anatomy. Likewise, the scientist and mathematician Galileo Galilei investigated one natural law after another. By dropping different-sized cannonballs from the top of a building, for instance, he proved that all objects fall at the same rate of acceleration. He also built a powerful telescope and used it to show that the Earth and other planets revolved around the sun and not, as religious authorities argued, the other way around. (For this, Galileo was arrested for heresy and threatened with torture and death, but he refused to recant: “I do not believe that the same God who has endowed us with senses, reason and intellect has intended us to forgo their use,” he said.)

However, perhaps the most important technological development of the Renaissance happened not in Italy but in Germany, where Johannes Gutenberg invented the mechanical movable-type printing press in the middle of the 15th century. For the first time, it was possible to make books – and, by extension, knowledge – widely available.

Renaissance art and architecture

During the Italian Renaissance, art was everywhere. Patrons such as Florence’s Medici family sponsored projects large and small, and successful artists became celebrities in their own right.



Renaissance artists and architects applied many humanist principles to their work. For example, the architect Filippo Brunelleschi applied the elements of classical Roman architecture – shapes, columns and especially proportion – to his own buildings. The magnificent eight-sided dome he built at the Santa Maria del Fiore cathedral in Florence was an engineering triumph – it was 144 feet across, weighed 37,000 tons and had no buttresses to hold it up – as well as an aesthetic one.

Brunelleschi also devised a way to draw and paint using linear perspective. That is, he figured out how to paint from the perspective of the person looking at the painting, so that space would appear to recede into the frame. After the architect Leon Battista Alberti explained the principles behind linear perspective in his treatise *Della Pittura* (On Painting), it became one of the most noteworthy elements of almost all Renaissance painting. Later, many painters began to use a technique called *chiaroscuro* to create an illusion of three-dimensional space on a flat canvas.

The end of the Italian Renaissance

By the end of the 15th century, Italy was being torn apart by one war after another. The kings of England, France and Spain, along with the pope and the Holy Roman emperor, battled for control of the wealthy peninsula. At the same time, the Catholic Church, which was itself wracked with scandal and corruption, had begun a violent crackdown on dissenters. In 1545, the Council of Trent officially established the Roman Inquisition. In this climate, humanism was akin to heresy. The Italian Renaissance was over.

Quiz

- 1 Read the selection from the section "The new humanism, cornerstone of the Renaissance."

Instead of devoting themselves to ordinary jobs or to the asceticism of the monastery, they could enjoy worldly pleasures. They traveled around Italy, studying ancient ruins and rediscovering Greek and Roman texts.

Which phrase helps explain what "asceticism" means by describing its OPPOSITE?

- (A) devoting themselves
 - (B) ordinary jobs
 - (C) enjoy worldly pleasures
 - (D) studying ancient ruins
- 2 Read the sentence from the section "Renaissance art and architecture."

Brunelleschi also devised a way to draw and paint using linear perspective.

What does the verb "devised" convey in the sentence above?

- (A) a sense of deviousness
- (B) a sense of ingenuity
- (C) a sense of desperation
- (D) a sense of indolence

- 3 Which sentence BEST summarizes how the Catholic Church affected the Renaissance?
- (A) The Catholic Church feared the ideas of the Renaissance and resented the money being spent on it by the wealthy citizens of Florence; it arrested many humanist philosophers in an attempt to end their celebrity among the wealthy.
 - (B) The Catholic Church supported the Renaissance at first by giving people plenty of time to dedicate to philosophy and art; it later reversed its position and joined France and Spain in a war against Italian Renaissance thinkers.
 - (C) The Catholic Church slowed the start of the Renaissance by continuing to insist that people should focus on heavenly rather than earthly ideas; it attempted to stop its spread by making an example of the astronomer Galileo.
 - (D) The Catholic Church fought against the Renaissance from its start by arresting and punishing its thinkers; it contributed largely to its end by making the philosophy of humanism an act of heresy under the Roman Inquisition.
- 4 Which of the following ideas did the author develop LEAST in this article about the Renaissance?
- (A) the lasting impact of its ideas and inventions
 - (B) the relationship between humanism and ancient ideas
 - (C) the studies and inventions of its notable figures
 - (D) the role of wealth in creating its cultural environment