Renaissance

The movement of cultural renewal, which started in Italy in the fourteenth century. It marks the end of the middle ages and the rediscovery of classical civilisation and its models in art, literature and science.

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[See also scientific revolution]


Summary Article: Renaissance

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(rĕnäsëns', -zäns') [Fr.,=rebirth], term used to describe the development of Western civilization that marked the transition from medieval to modern times. This article is concerned mainly with general developments and their impact in the fields of science, rhetoric, literature, and music. For a discussion of developments in the arts see Renaissance art and architecture.

Historical Background

In the 12th cent. a rediscovery of Greek and Roman literature occurred across Europe that eventually led to the development of the humanist movement in the 14th cent. In addition to emphasizing Greek and Latin scholarship, humanists believed that each individual had significance within society. The growth of an interest in humanism led to the changes in the arts and sciences that form common conceptions of the Renaissance.

The 14th cent. through the 16th cent. was a period of economic flux in Europe; the most extensive changes took place in Italy. After the death of Frederick II in 1250, emperors lost power in Italy and throughout Europe; none of Frederick's successors equaled him. Power fell instead into the hands of various popes; after the Great Schism (1378–1415; see Schism, Great), when three popes held power simultaneously, control returned to secular rulers.

During the Renaissance small Italian republics developed into despotisms as the centers of power moved from the landed estates to the cities. Europe itself slowly developed into groups of self-sufficient compartments. At the height of the Renaissance there were five major city-states in Italy: the combined state of Naples and Sicily, the Papal State, Florence, Milan, and Venice. Italy's economic growth is best exemplified in the development of strong banks, most notably the Medici bank of Florence. England, France, and Spain also began to develop economically based class systems.

Science

Beginning in the latter half of the 15th cent., a humanist faith in classical scholarship led to the search for ancient texts that would increase current scientific knowledge. Among the works rediscovered were
Galen's physiological and anatomical studies and Ptolemy's *Geography*. Botany, zoology, magic, alchemy, and astrology were developed during the Renaissance as a result of the study of ancient texts. Scientific thinkers such as Leonardo da Vinci, Nicolaus Copernicus, Galileo, Tycho Brahe, and Johannes Kepler attempted to refine earlier thought on astronomy. Among Leonardo's discoveries were the revelation that thrown or shot projectiles move in one curved trajectory rather than two; metallurgical techniques that allowed him to make great sculptures; and anatomical observations that increased the accuracy of his drawings.

In 1543 Copernicus wrote *De revolutionibus*, a work that placed the sun at the center of the universe and the planets in semicorrect orbital order around it; his work was an attempt to revise the earlier writings of Ptolemy. Galileo's most famous invention was an accurate telescope through which he observed the heavens; he recorded his findings in *Siderius nuncius* [starry messenger] (1610). Galileo's *Dialogo... sopra i due massimi sistemi del mondo* [dialogue concerning the two chief world systems] (1632), for which he was denounced by the current pope (because of Galileo's approval of Copernicus), resulted in his living under house arrest for the rest of his life. Tycho Brahe gave an accurate estimate of planetary positions and refuted the Aristotelian theory that placed the planets within crystal spheres. Kepler was the first astronomer to suggest that planetary orbits were elliptical.

**Rhetoric and Literature**

Humanism in Renaissance rhetoric was a reaction to Aristotelian scholasticism, as espoused by Francis Bacon, Averroës, and Albertus Magnus, among others. While the scholastics claimed a logical connection between word and thought, the humanists differentiated between physical utterance and intangible meditation; they gave common usage priority over sets of logical rules.

The humanists also sought to emulate classical values. Joseph Webbe wrote textbooks that taught Latin through reconstruction of the sentences of classical authors from individual phrases and clauses. Roger Ascham taught that one could learn to speak effectively by studying the speeches of ancient orators. Thomas Elyot wrote *The Book Named the Governor*, which suggested rules for effective statesmanship. Thomas More's most significant contribution to humanism was *Utopia*, a design for an ideal society based primarily on works by classical authors.

The effect of humanism on English literature was wide and far-reaching. It is evidenced, for example, in the works of Ben Jonson and William Shakespeare. The poems and plays of Jonson often center on the difference between virtue and vice; Jonson considers sincerity, honesty, self-discipline, and concern to be chief virtues, while dissimulation, lying, or masking of identity is vicious behavior. His *Volpone* and *The Alchemist* exemplify humanist values. In a play such as Shakespeare's *Tempest*, a main character (Prospero) embodies a full range of human abilities: father, creator, ruler, magician, master, and scholar. In addition, Shakespeare took subject matter for many plays from classical sources (e.g., *Coriolanus*, *Trollius and Cressida*, and *Julius Caesar*).

In France Michel de Montaigne and François Rabelais were the most important proponents of humanist thought. Montaigne's essays are memorable for their clear statement of an individual's beliefs and their careful examination of society. In “On the Education of Children,” he suggests a remaking of secondary education according to classical models; in “On Cannibals,” he writes that cannibals are more civilized than others because they are removed from the dissimulation and vice of human society. Rabelais was the author of *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel*, the satirical biographies of two giants; the characters may be said to represent the humanist belief in the immensity of human capability. Guillaume Budé, Pierre de
Ronsard, Guillaume Du Bartas, Joachim Du Bellay, and Jean Bodin are other major French humanist figures.

In Italy Petrarch is considered a founder of the humanist movement. His *De viris illustribus*, a set of heroes’ lives, included both ancient heroes and such men as Adam; he also wrote a series of letters to classical figures (e.g., Cicero and Ovid). Giovanni Boccaccio, a follower of Petrarch, wrote works that include *De genealogia deorum gentilium* [on the genealogy of the gods of the gentiles], a collection of classical myths, and the *Decameron*, a book of 100 stories told by Italian courtesans taking refuge from the Black Plague. Coluccio Salutati (1331–1406) was a Florentine political administrator who wrote treatises on humanism, taught thinkers Poggio and Bruni, and accumulated a large library of ancient Greek and Roman texts.

The Renaissance Italian Leone Battista Alberti is famed for a series of dialogues in which he teaches classical virtues in a vernacular tongue. Niccolò Machiavelli wrote *Il Principe* [the prince], in which he memorably described the various shapes a ruler must assume in order to become an effective leader, and *Discorsi* [the discourses], in which he studies Livy in a search for classical values. *The Book of the Courtier* by Baldassare Castiglione is essentially about Castiglione himself; in it the author delineates the characteristics of a perfect gentleman.

**Music**

Renaissance music took great liberties with musical form. In 1300 the most popular music was French and secular. Although secular music gradually spread all over Europe, it flowered in Italy. In fact, in about 1330 an Italian school of musical composition developed in Padua, Verona, Bologna, Florence, and Milan. Often this music was written in the vernacular; its primary composers, thinkers such as Leonardo Giustiniani (1398–1446) and Marsilio Ficino, would often improvise words to the accompaniment of a lute-violin. This experimentation led to the development of contrapuntal music, or music that hinged on the pleasing interplay of two melodic lines.

Josquin Desprez composed masses, chansons, and motets, of which his *Hercules Dux Ferriare* mass and *Misere* motet are lasting examples; he was one of the first composers to use imitation, or repetition of melodies, successfully within a composition. Giovanni Pierluigi Palestrina also composed mainly religious music. He distinguished himself with his motets and masses, namely *Veni creator spiritus*, *Missa brevis*, and *Accepit Jesus calicem*; he also made full use of the cantus firmus, or pre-existing melody around which other melodies are intertwined, in his compositions. Orlando di Lasso was also a noted composer whose work included motets, chansons, and madrigals.

Madrigals were popular throughout Europe; the best known, *The White and Gentle Swan*, was by the Flemish composer Jacob Arcadelt. English composers rivaled the Flemish; leading English madrigal composers of the Renaissance include Thomas Weelkes, William Byrd, Thomas Morley, and Orlando Gibbons. Often, English madrigal composers were influenced by the work of Italians. The main Italian madrigal composers were Luca Marenzio, Carlo Gesualdo, and Claudio Monteverdi. Monteverdi was the most accomplished artist of the three; in addition to composing madrigals, he composed the first major operas, including *L’Arianna* and *Orfeo*.

**Bibliography**

See Burckhardt’s oft-translated classic, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860); Lucas, H. S., *The Renaissance and the Reformation* (2d ed. 1960);
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