

The Renaissance Begins

Toward the end of the Middle Ages, a great flowering of culture called the Renaissance began in Italy. In this chapter, you will learn about the Renaissance and how it began.

Renaissance is a French word that means “rebirth.” Historians use the word to describe the rebirth of widespread interest in classical art and learning that took place in Europe from about 1300 to about 1600 C.E.

“Classical” refers to the cultures of ancient Greece and Rome. Although there was no sudden end to the Middle Ages, the Renaissance changed many aspects of people’s lives over time. Medieval European society was based on feudalism. Most people lived on feudal manors. The Roman Catholic Church encouraged people to think more about life after death than about daily life on Earth. Except for the clergy, few people were educated.



Leonardo da Vinci's Lady with an Ermine reflects Renaissance ideas. By the Late Middle Ages, changes were occurring that paved the way for the Renaissance. Trade and commerce increased. Cities grew larger and wealthier. Newly wealthy merchants and bankers supported the growth of arts and learning. A renewed interest in ancient cultures started a flood of new ideas. Greek and Roman examples inspired new styles of architecture, approaches to the arts, and ways of thinking.

Beginning in Italy, a philosophy called *humanism* developed. Humanists believed in the worth and potential of all individuals. They balanced religious faith with belief in the power of the mind. Humanists took a fresh interest in human society and the natural world. This thinking contributed to the burst of creativity during the Renaissance.

The Growth of Trade and Commerce

One reason for the flowering of culture during the Renaissance was the growth of trade and commerce. Trade brought new ideas as well as goods into Europe. A bustling economy created prosperous cities and new classes of people who had the wealth to support art and learning.

Increased Contact Between East and West

Starting in the 11th century, the Crusades strengthened contacts between western Europe and Byzantine and Muslim cultures. Merchants brought goods and ideas from the East that helped to reawaken interest in classical culture. In the 13th century, the Mongol conquests in Asia made it safer for traders to travel along the Silk Road to China. The tales of the Italian traveler Marco Polo sparked even greater interest in the East. Food, art, and luxury goods, such as silk and spices, moved along the trade routes linking Europe to Africa and Asia.

Cities, such as Venice and Genoa in Italy, were centrally located on the trade routes that linked the rest of western Europe with the East. They became bustling, prosperous trading centers

that attracted merchants and customers, as did cities in northern Europe, such as Bruges and Brussels. Trade ships carried goods to England, Scandinavia, and present-day Russia by way of the English Channel and the Baltic and North seas. Towns along the routes connecting southern and northern Europe, such as Cologne and Mainz in Germany, provided inns and other services for traveling merchants.

A New Economy

The increase in trade led to a new kind of economy. During the Middle Ages, people bartered, or traded, goods. By the Renaissance, people were using coins to buy merchandise, creating a money economy. Coins came from many places, so money changers were needed to convert one type of **currency** [**currency: the form of money used in a country**] into another.

As a result of all this activity, craftspeople, merchants, and bankers became more important in society. Craftspeople produced goods that merchants traded across Europe. Bankers exchanged currency, loaned money to merchants and rulers, and financed their own businesses. Some merchants and bankers grew very rich. With their abundant wealth, they could afford to make their cities more beautiful. Wealthy patrons commissioned (ordered and paid for) new buildings and art. They also helped to found universities. Prosperous Renaissance cities grew into flourishing educational and cultural centers.

The Influence of Italian City-States

The Renaissance began in northern and central Italy. One reason why it began there was the prosperity of Italian **city-states** [**city-states: an independent state consisting of a city and its surrounding territory**].



In the Late Middle Ages, most of western Europe was made up of fiefs ruled by nobles. Above the nobles were monarchs. In Italy, however, growing towns developed into independent city-states. Each city-state consisted of a powerful city and the surrounding **territory** [**territory: a specific area of land**], which might include other towns.

The Italian city-states conducted their own trade, collected their own taxes, and made their own laws. Some, such as Florence, were **republics** [**republics: a form of government in which citizens elect representatives to rule for them**] that were governed by elected councils.

In theory, the power in republics belonged to the people. In fact, it often lay in the hands of rich merchants. During the Middle Ages, guilds of craftspeople and merchants became very powerful. During the Renaissance, groups of guild members,

called boards, often ruled Italian city-states. Boards were supposed to change members frequently. However, wealthy families often gained long-term control. As a result, some city-states were ruled by a single rich family, such as the Medici (MED-uh-chee) family in Florence.

Trade and Specialization

Trade made the Italian city-states dazzlingly wealthy. Italy's central Mediterranean location in the middle of the trade routes connected distant places with the rest of western Europe. People from all over Europe came to northern Italy to buy, sell, and do their banking.

Some Italian city-states developed specializations. Florence became a center for cloth making and banking. Milan produced metal goods and armor. The port city of Genoa was a trade center for ivory and gold from northern Africa. Venice, the most powerful city-state, had hundreds of ships that controlled the trade routes in the Mediterranean Sea. Silk, spices, and perfume from Asia flowed into Venice. The city-states' wealth encouraged a boom in art and learning. Rich families paid for the creation of statues, paintings, beautiful buildings, and elegant avenues. They built new centers of learning, such as universities and hospitals. From the city-states of Italy, Renaissance ideas spread to the rest of Europe.

The Growth of Humanism

The interest in learning during the Renaissance was spurred on by **humanism** [**humanism: a philosophy that tries to balance religious faith with an emphasis on individual dignity and an interest in nature and human society**]. This way of thinking sought to balance religious faith with an **emphasis** [**emphasis: special importance**] on individual dignity and an interest in nature and human society. Humanism first arose in Italy as a result of the renewed interest in classical culture. Many early humanists eagerly hunted for ancient Greek and Roman books, coins, and other artifacts that could help them learn about the classical world.

One of the first humanists was an Italian poet named Francesco Petrarch. Petrarch especially loved old books. He searched for them all over Europe and encouraged his friends to bring him any they found. Eventually, he created a large collection of ancient Latin and Greek texts, which he made available to other scholars. Scholars from all over Europe traveled to Italy to learn about the new humanist ideas inspired by classical culture. They studied such subjects as art, architecture, government, and language. They read classical history and poetry. They began to ask probing questions. What did classical artists find most beautiful about the human body? How did the Romans construct their buildings?

In their studies of classical culture, humanists discovered a new way of looking at life. They began to create a philosophy based on the importance and dignity of each individual. Humanists believed that all people have the ability to control

their own lives and achieve greatness. In education, they stressed study of the **humanities** [**humanities: collectively, areas of study that focus on human life and culture, such as history, literature, and ethics**] —a group of subjects that focus on human life and culture. These subjects include grammar, rhetoric (the study of persuasive language), history, poetry, and ethics (the study of moral values and behavior).

What did Humanists do?

Humanists tried to put ancient ideas into practice. Architects, for example, studied Greek and Roman ruins. They designed buildings with pillars, arches, and courtyards like those of classical buildings. The humanists did not simply imitate classical achievements. They tried to improve on the work of the ancient Greeks and Romans. In universities, scholars began to teach methods of observation and experimentation. Renaissance scientists proposed new ideas about the stars and planets. Artists and students of medicine closely studied human anatomy. Poets wrote about both religious subjects and everyday experiences. Writers produced works of history and studies of politics.

Humanist scholars in the Renaissance spent time reading, studying, and writing about classical culture. The influence of classical ideals changed ideas about government. Humanists separated the state and its right to rule from the Church. In doing so, they helped lay the foundation for modern thinking about politics and government. Humanist ideals also changed people's thinking about social standing. In feudal times, people were born into a certain status in society. If someone was born a peasant, he or she would always have less

status than a noble. In general, Renaissance thinkers prized individual achievement more than a person's class or family.

Individualism

This emphasis on **individualism** [**individualism: the belief in the importance of an individual's achievements and dignity**] was an enormous shift from medieval thinking. The humanists' new ideas sometimes brought them into conflict with the Catholic Church. The Church taught that laws were made by God and that those who broke them were sinful. It encouraged people to follow its teachings without question to save their souls. For the Church, life after death was more important than life on Earth. In **contrast** [**contrast: a strong difference between two or more things**], humanists believed that people should use their minds to question everything. Most tried to balance religious faith and its emphasis on the afterlife with an active interest in daily life. Some directly challenged teachings that were important to the Church. An Italian humanist, Giordano Bruno, paid for his ideas by being burned at the stake.