Italy: Birthplace of the Renaissance

**MAIN IDEA**

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

**WHY IT MATTERS NOW**

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

**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.

**Italy’s Advantages**

The years 1300 to 1600 saw an explosion of creativity in Europe. Historians call this period the Renaissance (reh-nuh-see-neh). 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 (MEH-dee-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.

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 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 (kah-stee-LOH-nee) 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

The Renaissance Woman According to *The Courtier*, upper-class women also 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 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.

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•ju•LOH) glorified the human body. (See page 420.)

New Techniques Donatello (DAHN•ah•TEHL•oh) made sculpture more realistic by carving natural postures 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 since ancient times. Renaissance artists, such as the painter Masaccio (muh•SAH•che•oh), also rediscovered the technique of perspective, which indicates three dimensions.

**Per s p e c t i v e in Paintings**

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.
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.

St. Peter’s Basilica
As an architect, he designed this dome to top St. Peter’s Basilica (Church) in Rome. Michelangelo began working on the church in 1546. It still wasn’t finished when he died in 1564. Another architect had to finish the dome.

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.

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.

Connect to History
Clarifying How does the work of Michelangelo show that he was influenced by Renaissance values? Explain.

Researching Look through books on 20th century art to find artists who work in more than one medium, such as painting and sculpture. Share your findings with the class.
Leonardo, Renaissance Man
Leonardo da Vinci (LAY-uh-NAHR-doh duh-VIHN-ehee) 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.

Raphael Advances Realism
Raphael (RAF-ee-uhl) was younger than Michelangelo and Leonardo. 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.

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 prominent 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. Dante’s native language was Italian. 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.
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.

Niccolò Machiavelli, shown here with his hand on a book, was much more than just a cynical political thinker. He was also a patriot, a poet, and a historian.

Machiavelli Advises Rulers The Prince (1513), by Niccolò Machiavelli (make•ee•uh•VEHLLee), 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.

NICCOLO MACHIAVELLI, The Prince

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.
The Northern Renaissance

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.

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-tihn-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. 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. Many of his prints portray religious subjects such as the one on page 423. Others portray classical myths. He also painted realistic landscapes and a self-portrait in which he portrayed himself as a Renaissance 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 (yahn van YK). 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.

Daily Life

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 townsfolk related to the groom.

Think Through History

B. Contrasting

How was the development and spread of oil painting different from many other Renaissance developments?
In addition to new techniques, van Eyck’s paintings display unusually realistic details and reveal the personality of their subjects. His work influenced later artists in northern Europe.

Flemish painting reached its peak after 1550 with the work of Pieter Bruegel (BROY-guhl) the Elder. Like van Eyck, Bruegel was interested in realistic details and individual people. He captured scenes from everyday peasant life such as weddings, dances, harvests, and the changing seasons. Bruegel also produced paintings that illustrated proverbs or taught a moral. Some of his paintings protested harsh Spanish rule over his country.

In all his work, Bruegel’s rich colors, vivid details, and balanced use of space give a sense of life and feeling. He was also very skillful in portraying large numbers of people. Not only did Bruegel produce a large number of paintings, he inspired two sons and three grandsons to also become painters.

**Northern Writers Try to Reform Society**

Just as Italian art influenced northern European painters, so did Renaissance ideas influence the writers and philosophers of northern Europe. These writers adopted the ideal of humanism. However, some gave it a more religious slant. Because of this, some northern humanists are also called Christian humanists.

**Christian Humanists** The best known of the Christian humanists were Desiderius Erasmus (DEHZ-ih-DEER-ee-uhhs ih-RAZ-muhs) of Holland and Thomas More of England. The two were close friends.

Born in Rotterdam, Erasmus received honors from princes, kings, and cardinals for his brilliant writings. In 1509, while he was a guest in More’s house, Erasmus wrote his most famous work, *The Praise of Folly*. This book poked fun at greedy merchants, heartick lovers, quarrelsome scholars, and pompous priests. Although some of Erasmus’s most stinging barbs were aimed at the clergy, his work is strongly Christian. Erasmus believed in a Christianity of the heart, not one of ceremonies or rules. He thought that in order to improve society, all people should study the Bible.

Also concerned with society’s flaws, Thomas More tried to show a better model. In 1516, he wrote the book *Utopia* about an imaginary land inhabited by a peace-loving people. In Greek, *Utopia* means “no place,” but in English it has come to mean an ideal place because of More’s book. In Utopia, greed, corruption, war, and crime had been weeded out. Because the Utopians weren’t greedy, they had little use for money:

**A VOICE FROM THE PAST**

Gold and silver, of which money is made, are so treated . . . that no one values them more highly than their true nature deserves. Who does not see that they are far inferior to iron in usefulness since without iron mortals cannot live any more than without fire and water?

THOMAS MORE, *Utopia*

The French humanist François Rabelais (RAB-eh-LAY) provided a contrast to Erasmus and More in several ways. They wrote in Latin, while Rabelais wrote his comic adventure *Gargantua and Pantagruel* in vernacular French. More secular than either Erasmus or More, Rabelais believed that human beings were basically good. They should live by their instincts rather than religious rules. As he told of the wild adventures of the giants Gargantua and Pantagruel, he poked fun at his society. Rabelais’s humor was uproarious and earthy, although he made many serious points about the nature of humanity, education, and government.

**William Shakespeare** William Shakespeare wrote in Renaissance England. Many people regard him as the greatest playwright of all time. Shakespeare was born in
1564 in Stratford-upon-Avon, a small town about 90 miles northwest of London. By 1592 he was living in London and writing poems and plays.

His works display a masterful command of the English language and a deep understanding of human beings. He revealed the souls of men and women through scenes of dramatic conflict. His most famous plays include the tragedies *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and the comedy *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Many of these plays frankly examine human flaws. However, Shakespeare also had one of his characters deliver a speech that expresses the Renaissance’s high view of human nature:

*A Voice From the Past*

What a piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving, how express and admirable in action, how like an angel in apprehension [understanding], how like a god! the beauty of the world; the paragon of animals.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *Hamlet*

Like many Renaissance writers, Shakespeare revered the classics and drew on them for inspiration and plots. One of his great tragedies, for example, tells the story of the assassination of Julius Caesar—the Roman general and statesman.

The Elizabethan Age  The Renaissance in England is also called the Elizabethan Age, for Queen Elizabeth I. She reigned from 1558 to 1603. Elizabeth was well-educated and knew French, Italian, Latin, and Greek. In addition to running a kingdom (see page 432), she also wrote poetry. As queen, she patronized artists and writers. Poet Edmund Spenser dedicated his long poem *The Faerie Queene* (1590) to her with these words: “To the most high, mighty, and magnificent Empress, renowned for piety, virtue, and all gracious government, Elizabeth.”

**Printing Spreads Renaissance Ideas**

One thing that helped spread Renaissance ideas throughout Europe was a new invention that adapted Chinese technology. The Chinese had invented block printing, in which a printer carved a word or letter on a wooden block, inked the block, and then used it to print on paper. Around 1045, Bi Sheng invented movable type, or a separate piece of type for each character in the language. However, since the Chinese writing system contained thousands of different characters, most Chinese printers found movable type impractical.

Gutenberg Invents the Printing Press  During the 13th century, block-printed items reached Europe from China. European printers began to use block printing to create whole pages to bind into books. However, this process was too slow to satisfy the Renaissance demand for knowledge and books. Johann Gutenberg, a craftsman from Mainz, Germany, reinvented movable type around 1440. The method was practical for Europeans because their languages have a very small number of letters in their alphabets.

Gutenberg then invented the **printing press**. The printing press is a machine that presses paper against a tray full of inked movable type. Using this invention, Gutenberg printed a complete Bible, the **Gutenberg Bible**, in about 1455. It was the first full-size book printed with movable type.
Printing Spreads Learning The printing press had a revolutionary impact on European society. It enabled a printer to produce hundreds of copies, all exactly alike, of a single work. For the first time, books were cheap enough that many people could buy them. Printing spread quickly to other cities in Europe. By 1500, presses in about 250 cities had printed between 9 and 10 million books.

New ideas spread more quickly than ever before. At first printers produced many religious works. Soon they began to provide books on other subjects such as travel guides and medical manuals. The availability of books encouraged people to learn to read and so caused a rise in literacy.

Writing in vernacular languages also increased because even people who could not afford a classical education could now buy books. Printers produced the Bible in the vernacular, which allowed more people to read it. People began to interpret the Bible for themselves and to become more critical of priests and their behavior. This eventually led to demands for religious reform.

The End of the Renaissance In both Italy and northern Europe, the Renaissance had stirred a burst of creative activity. Artists in both regions studied classical culture, praised individual achievement, and produced works using new techniques. During the 1600s, new ideas and artistic styles appeared. Nonetheless, Renaissance ideals continued to influence European thought. For example, the Renaissance belief in the dignity of the individual played a key role in the gradual rise of democratic ideas.