



The Renaissance

THERE is a strong sense of unreality about the Renaissance — that intellectual flowering which is supposed to be a sort of a dividing line between modern European civilization and the Middle Ages.

But the Renaissance had no clear beginning and no real end. The “Age of the Renaissance” conventionally begins around 1450. It has no specific dates. There were large sectors of Europe that were never touched by the Renaissance. Some historians have written that the Renaissance was the most remarkable feature of the age, and yet, it affected only a very tiny area of Europe. Thus, this intellectual movement—this rebirth—that did so much to revolutionize our art and literature, philosophy and worldview—that is so immensely significant to us, was untypical and unrepresentative of the time and place that was 15th century Europe.

Faced with this problem, many historians of the period have lost interest in the Renaissance. Many historians now like to spotlight magic, poverty, disease, or the horrors of European colonial ventures. But, we should remember the artistic and intellectual achievements made by the exceptional intellects of the Renaissance. The Renaissance is what made 17th century Europe so different from 15th century Europe.

An American historian complained that, “Ever since the Renaissance invented itself some six hundred years ago, there has been no agreement as to what it is.” The Renaissance, for example, was not simply about a renewed interest in classical ideas. We have seen that such a revival had been growing since the twelfth century. Nor did it involve either a total rejection of medieval values or a sudden return to the world-view of Greece and Rome. Christianity didn’t suddenly give way to classical pagan religion. Perhaps, the essence of the Renaissance involved people who used classical models to test the authority underlying conventional culture and wisdom.



Leonardo Da Vinci...
was an Italian polymath: scientist, mathematician, engineer, inventor, anatomist, painter, sculptor, architect, musician, and writer. Two of his works, the Mona Lisa and The Last Supper are the most famous, and most imitated portrait and religious painting of all time.

Perhaps the greatest of the Renaissance Florentines was Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519). He produced what is perhaps the best known painting in the world — we call it the Mona Lisa (1506). Leonardo had limitless talents and limitless curiosity. His notebooks contain everything from anatomical drawings to designs for a helicopter, a submarine, a machine-gun.

So, what ideas define the Renaissance. The first quality of the Renaissance has been defined as “independence of mind.” The ideal Renaissance human was a person who had mastered all branches of art and thought. This “complete man” did not have to depend on any outside authority for the formation of knowledge, tastes, and beliefs. A second factor related to the first was humanism. Renaissance artists and thinkers focused their works on human activity, the human form, and believed that the abilities and accomplishments of humans approached the divine. This is a very different understanding of man’s place in the universe from the views held in the Middle Ages.

I would like to use the works of three Renaissance men to illustrate the ideas of the Renaissance. They are Michelangelo Buonarroti, Niccolo Machiavelli and Baldesar Castiglione.

Michelangelo (1475-1564)

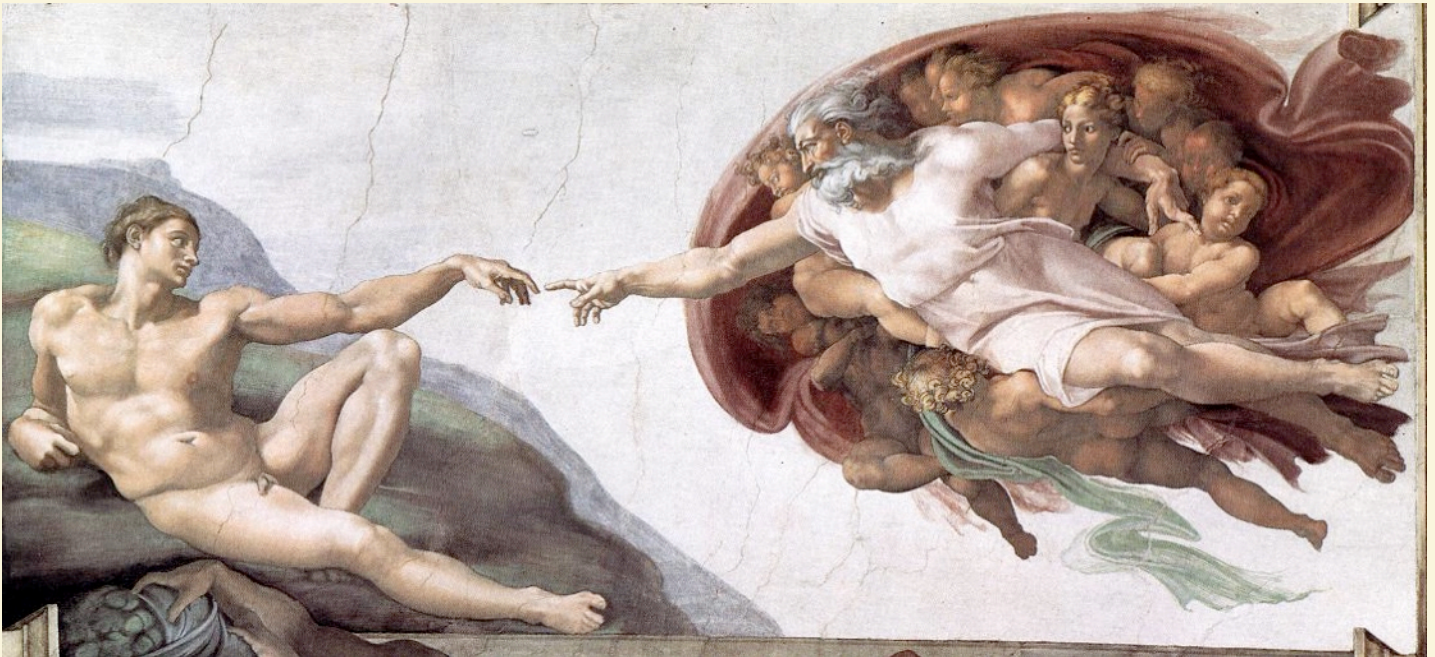
Michelangelo of Florence is perhaps the best known figure of the Renaissance. He was a painter, sculptor, architect, and poet. The main focus of all of his paintings

and statues is the human figure, which is always powerful, colossal, magnificent. If man, and the potential of the individual, lay at the center of Italian Renaissance culture, then Michelangelo is the supreme Renaissance artist.

Michelangelo's greatest achievement and the best example of his work as a painter appears on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Rome (1508-1512). These amazing frescoes depict scenes from the book of Genesis. All the panels in this series, including God Dividing the Light from Darkness, The Creation of Adam, and The Flood, exemplify the young artist’s commitment to the heroic qualities of mankind. Whereas earlier church art was dedicated to the glorification of God, and humans had only a minor presence in the work, Michelangelo’s paintings seem to glorify humans as God’s crowning achievement. In his portrayal of the Creation, the centerpiece of the ceiling, Michelangelo manages to make Adam appear greater than a man—more Godlike — and, at the same time, he makes God appear tender, caring, in effect, more human.

Niccolo Machiavelli (1469-1527)

Few of the Italian thinkers of the Renaissance were particularly original; their greatness lay primarily in their ways of expressing classical themes and their popularization of classical ideas. This cannot be said for Niccolo Machiavelli (1469-1527). Machiavelli is considered the greatest political philosopher of the Italian Renaissance.



The Creation scene from the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican in Rome.

At the end of the 15th century, Italy had become the center of a series of international struggles. Dissension and strife was never far from the surface in local and Italian politics. Both France and Spain had invaded the peninsula and were competing with each other for the allegiance of the Italian states. These Italian States were often torn themselves by internal dissension which made them easy prey for foreign conquerors. In 1498 Machiavelli entered the service of the newly founded the Republic of Florence. His duties largely involved diplomatic missions to other states. While living in Rome he became fascinated with the achievements of Cesare Borgia, the son of Pope Alexander VI. Borgia had successfully restored order and stability to the city of Rome. Machiavelli observed with approval that Cesare had achieved this by through a combination of ruthlessness and shrewdness and a complete subordination of morality to achieve his political ends.

In 1512, the Republic of Florence was overthrown. Machiavelli found himself without a job. Disappointed and embittered, he spent the remainder of his life in exile devoting his time to writing and study. His most important work is entitled *The Prince*. In this book, Machiavelli describes the policies and practices of government, not in accordance with some lofty ideal, but as they actually were. He states that the Supreme obligation of the ruler is to maintain the power and safety of the country over which he rules. No consideration of justice or mercy, of morality or ethics, of the sanctity of treaties, should be allowed to stand in a ruler's way. Machiavelli maintained that all men are prompted and guided exclusively by motives of self-interest. Thus, rulers should not expect or take for granted the loyalty or affection of his subjects. The aims and goals of the state can only be achieved through ruthlessness and duplicity, and without regard to morality or justice.

Baldesar Castiglione

Perhaps the work of another Renaissance diplomat, Baldesar Castiglione, is more agreeable to our tastes than

the shocking political theories of Machiavelli. In *The Book of the Courtier* (1516) Castiglione suggested guidelines for proper aristocratic conduct. This cleverly written “how to book” of etiquette stands in sharp contrast to the earlier works on the subject. Previous authors taught Medieval virtues. They recommended that aristocrats and courtiers

be sober, self-restrained, and pious. Courtiers were expected to give their lives in service to their country, their ruler and their family. Castiglione wasn't particularly interested in that stuff. He lived in an Italy dominated by magnificent princely courts, where courtiers were expected to spend their time in the company of their ruler. So, Castiglione taught how to attain the elegant and seemingly effortless qualities necessary for acting like a “true gentleman.” The key word here is Acting. Castiglione popularized the ideal of the “Renaissance man”: one who is accomplished in many different pursuits and is also brave, witty, and “courteous,” meaning civilized and learned.

Castiglione did not ignore the female sex. Earlier writers, if they talked about women at all, stressed the

woman's role in “hearth and home.” Castiglione stressed the ways that court ladies could be “gracious entertainers,” and why it was in their own interest to exhibit many of the same courtly traits like intelligence and wit, as men. Thus, he was one of the first European male writers to offer women an independent role outside of the household, a fact which should not be underrated even though his stress on “pleasing affability” today might seem demeaning. Castiglione's book was widely read throughout Europe for over a century after its publication. It spread Italian ideals of “civility” all over the continent.

Conclusion

The principal product of this new thinking that we call the Renaissance lay in a growing conviction that people were capable of mastering the world in which they lived. The great thinkers, writers and artists of the Renaissance were filled with self-confidence. They felt that God-given ingenuity could, and should, be used to unravel the secrets of God's universe; and that man's fate on earth could be controlled and improved.



Baldesar Castiglione (1478-1529)

This was a decisive break with the mentality of the Middle Ages. Medieval men and women saw themselves as the pawns of Providence, overwhelmed by the unknowable workings of their environment and of their own nature. Medieval attitudes were dominated by a paralyzing anxiety about human shortcomings, human ignorance and human inadequacy in the face of an all knowing, all powerful and wrathful God. Filled with sin and incapable of bettering their lot, Europeans of the Middle Ages believed that they could do little more than bear the burdens of life on this world and prepare as best they could for the next.

The effects of the Renaissance steadily spread from Italy throughout Europe. Renaissance thought and art flourished in France, the low countries, England, and even into Eastern Europe.

While the Renaissance had, perhaps, little effect on those who lived in Europe during the 15th and 16th centuries, it had a profound effect on succeeding generations. Its contribution to the future of Western civilization may be summed up in a single word that defines all of the basic intellectual pursuits of the period. That word is humanism. Humanism is a focus on the dignity of human beings as the most excellent of God's creatures below the angels. Some Renaissance thinkers argued that man was excellent because he alone of earthly creatures could obtain knowledge of God; others stressed that humans could master their own destiny. Either way, Renaissance thinkers taught civilization the belief in the nobility and potential of the human race.

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