

Unit 1: The Renaissance (1300 CE to 1600 CE)

Part B. The Renaissance in Italy and the North

Textbook Chapter 1.1 and 1.2

*The Renaissance was a time when people desired a return to the classical ways of ancient Greece and Rome and was an era of human history that marked the transition from **old** (medieval ages of castles, knights, feudal lords and serfs) to the **new** (the modern age of nations, nationalism, and a revival of Western culture and civilization).*

*Prior to the fourteenth century, Europe was experiencing an era referred to as “The Dark Ages”. The name for the Dark Ages came from an Italian scholar and poet named **Petrarch**. Petrarch is noted for being the man responsible for starting the Renaissance through his poetry. In one of his poems, dated to the 1330s CE, he writes, “Amidst the errors there shone forth men of genius; no less keen were their eyes, although they were surrounded by darkness and dense gloom.” With these words, the Dark Age would draw to a close, and the Renaissance would begin. Unbeknownst to many at the time, these scholars, philosophers, and artists, would come to change the world forever.*

During the Renaissance, there are four main areas of civilization that change:

1. *Politics*
2. *Society*
3. *Economics*
4. *Culture*

***Politics** change as city-states such as **Florence**, **Milan**, and **Venice**, emerged as powerhouses and cultural centers during the Renaissance. It is important to understand that Italy, during the time of the renaissance, was not a unified nation as it is today. During the 1300s, Italy was made up of city-states that were ruled by powerful and wealthy families or politicians. Figures such as **Niccolo Machiavelli** and his work, “**The Prince**”, would shape the way in which politicians would handle the business of their state forever.*

*In **society**, there was a shift from a largely **agricultural** society to an **urban** society that would now thrive in cities such as those mentioned above. Social norms shifted as people began to worry about the “here and now” as opposed to worrying about living the perfect life of spirituality in hopes of reaching heaven. The idea of the individual and the glorification of the self became more prominent during the Renaissance as well.*

*In **economics**, the idea of banking that once was used in Babylon, Greece, and then Rome, now emerged in Italian cities. Florence, for example, was the center of Renaissance banking. Families, such as the Medici, dominated Florentine banking and*

the introduction of **double-entry bookkeeping** as a means of keeping track of transactions made bankers wealthier than anyone could ever have imagined.

Artists such as **Michelangelo, Donatello, Leonardo, and Raphael** would change the way that paintings, sculpture, and art itself, would be seen forever. Using the ideas of humanism and “the self”, these artists would produce works of art that are still considered masterpieces today.

Why Italy?

To understand why the Renaissance happened in Italy we need to examine the history of the area as well as its location on the **Mediterranean Sea**.

Italy was the center of the Roman Empire making it the perfect place for the rebirth of Rome to occur. Also in Rome was the center of the Catholic world (what would eventually become known as **Vatican City**). By having this large religious presence in Rome, and throughout Italy, many works of art during the Renaissance would be focused on religion. Another reason why most works of art during this time were religious is because the church would sponsor many of the era’s most famous artists. Therefore the art that they would create would also be religious.

Italy’s location on a world map makes it is easy to understand how this rebirth of learning could happen. Jutting out into the Mediterranean, Italy was home to many famous cities and ports. As merchants and sailors crossed the Mediterranean, many would dock in these ports and sell their goods or even buy items that they might require for trips.

Through systems of banking, which were discussed before, and this steady flow of trade, some Italians were able to make a fortune. Families such as the Medici and Orsini families would be some of the era’s most famous **patrons**, or financial supporters. Italy, simply put, had money. And money was needed to fund artists.

What and why: Renaissance Art

Art during the Renaissance is some of the best the world has ever seen. The Renaissance made art look more realistic as scholars, scientists, and even artists themselves, began to examine the world around them more closely. These people became known as **humanists**. Humanists believed that education, reason, and personal virtue mattered the most. They also focused on the here and now of the world not the spiritual afterlife that had concerned so many during the Middle Ages.

The human form, which had been put on the back burner during the Middle Ages, became the main focus in Renaissance art. By studying the anatomy of the human body, which often meant dissecting a body yourself, sculptors and artists could achieve detail and precision that they had lacked since the Western Roman Empire had fell.

***Perspective** was also used which allowed Renaissance artists to create 3D images on a flat surface.*

Who: Renaissance Art

***Donatello:** One of the greatest artists of the Renaissance began his career at only seventeen years old. Donatello was a Florentine, but when ready, he would travel to Rome to study the ancient ruins. After returning from Rome, Donatello wanted to create statues that were as great as the freestanding ones the Greeks and Romans had mastered. Where Donatello would differ is that he did not only focus on the front of the statue, but also the back of the statue. Most sculptures up to the Renaissance only focused on the front of the figure as the back was built into a wall. His sculptures were to be as lifelike as possible. Donatello's most famous sculpture would be his freestanding statue of **David** made out of bronze.*

***Michelangelo:** By thirteen, Michelangelo was already mastering the brush. However, sculpting would be his true calling. At the age of twenty-three, Michelangelo received a commission from the church to create "a Virgin Mary clothed, with the dead Christ in her arms, of the size of a proper man..." Within a year Michelangelo would complete the sculpture and it would become known as the **Pieta**.*

*After the completion of the Pieta Michelangelo was famous. Less than ten years later he would complete another masterpiece. Using a solid block of marble, Michelangelo sculpted his own **David**. Standing at sixteen feet tall, Michelangelo's David perfectly depicts the Renaissance's belief in human dignity, greatness, and form.*

*Yet, even after creating two masterpieces out of marble, Michelangelo would not hesitate to pick up the brush once again. In 1508 CE, Michelangelo was commissioned by the pope to paint the ceiling of the **Sistine Chapel**. This ceiling, however, was not just any ceiling; it was the place where cardinals met to elect a new pope.*

The ceiling itself was huge (130 feet long by 44 feet wide) and required Michelangelo to paint everyday, for three years straight, while being 65 feet off the ground. At the center of the ceiling was the main attraction: God reaching out to Adam to pass onto him the spirit of life.

***Raphael:** Michelangelo had frequent visitors while painting the Sistine Chapel. One of them was Raphael. Painting the walls of the pope's private library was the commission given to Raphael and allowed this young painter to learn from Michelangelo, given the fact that the library was only a short walk from the Sistine Chapel itself.*

*On the walls of the pope's library is where Raphael would create his own amazing work of art named **The School of Athens**. The painting featured great thinkers, warriors, scholars, musicians, artists, and philosophers from Greece, Rome, and even the Renaissance. Some major figures in the painting are Plato and Aristotle,*

Michelangelo, Alexander the Great, Dante, and even the young Raphael himself, observing and listening in on the many greats from the side of the painting.

Leonardo da Vinci: Arguably the most well known Renaissance man of the time was Leonardo da Vinci. From a young age, da Vinci exhibited characteristics of a legend. He would be tasked not only with creating paintings, but also thinking up new weapons, designing buildings, and even coming to amazing scientific conclusions, mainly in human anatomy.

Yet, on canvas, da Vinci would create two of the world's most famous pieces of art: **The Last Supper** and the **Mona Lisa**. The Last Supper portrays Jesus and his twelve apostles the night before his betrayal. Upon breaking bread, Jesus would announce, "one of you shall betray me" leaving eleven of the apostles to debate amongst each other. However, one would remain frozen and shocked at the revelation. Judas, with his elbow on the table, would be the one to betray Jesus. Prior to da Vinci's Last Supper, many portrayals had Judas isolated on the other side of the table. Yet, Leonardo chose to have Judas seated with the others with only his expression of shock and disbelief setting him apart from the others.

The Mona Lisa is a portrait of a tradesman's wife (although some people believe it is a self portrait of Leonardo, but this is not true.). The image is almost perfect as Lisa sits, gazing back at the viewer. Some often note that the smile on the woman is welcoming, warming, and friendly. Others state that her eyes are cold and her mouth in the shape of a smirk. Leonardo loved the painting so much that he never gave it to the man who commissioned him.

Dante Alighieri: Not all Renaissance men were masters of sculptures, sketches, brushes, and paints. Dante was a writer who produced one of the world's most famous pieces of literature, **Inferno**, which told the story of Dante as he traveled through the layers of the underworld. Ultimately, Inferno was only the first part of this epic poem (known as the Divine Comedy in which the underworld, Inferno, is followed by his trip through purgatory, before finally reaching paradise.), but what made Inferno famous was Dante's use of **vernacular**, better described as the common tongue or language.

Most literature during the Greek and Roman Empires, the Middle Ages, and the early stages of the Renaissance were written or transcribed in Latin. However, most people of the time could not read Latin! Only scholars and clergy could read Latin. Dante, however, wrote Inferno in the common Italian language, which allowed many people to read his work. In time, writing in the vernacular would become the norm. Yet, as we will examine during the Protestant Reformation, having major works written in the common language for anyone to read and interpret would pose a huge problem for the church.

The Northern Renaissance

By the start of the 15th century CE, Northern Europe was beginning to emerge from the shadows of the Middle Ages. In time, the economic growth that had helped Italy escape the Middle Ages would spread north and help major cities, in what would become the Netherlands and Germany, begin their own Renaissance.

*For all of the great creations during the Italian and Northern Renaissance, one that would change the world forever would be the **printing press** created by **Johannes Gutenberg**. Created in Germany, the printing press allowed for books (mainly the Bible.) to be copied very quickly making them more readily available. Prior to the invention of the printing press, books were hand copied at a dreadfully slow pace making them expensive and difficult to acquire for the average European. After the invention of the printing press the literacy rate skyrocketed as more people learned how to read. People all over Europe soon began to educate themselves in various fields of study, such as medicine and even mining.*

In a similar fashion to the Italian Renaissance, there were many artists to emerge during the Northern Renaissance. However, we will not focus on individuals in this section. Instead, we will look towards how their art differed from the Italian Renaissance. The differences can be described in two simple ways. First, artists of the Northern Renaissance used brighter colors than those artists of the Italian Renaissance. The second difference was that Northern artists focused more on the realistic view of humanity rather than the humanistic side of it. Realistically, not everyone was as ripped as Michelangelo's David. Detail was the main focal point of the Northern Renaissance, but instead of portraying perfect human beings, artists in Germany and Flanders desired realistic human beings. Some painters had to use a paintbrush with only a single hair on it to get the details just to their liking.

*The Northern Renaissance would also see great thinkers rise to alter the course of history. **Erasmus** was a Dutch priest who believed that the great works of literature should be translated into the vernacular. One great text that he believed should be made available to all was the Bible. He believed that reform was needed in the church and that this change could be brought about by allowing individuals to read and interpret the Bible in their own way. Erasmus would get his wish for reform to the church in due time, but we will examine this in our next reading...*

*In England, two great figures emerged. The first was **Sir Thomas More**. More believed in a **utopian** society wherein everything is perfect and that this could be achieved through education and the end of corruption in all aspects of life. The second figure to emerge from England was **William Shakespeare**. Shakespeare would produce roughly forty plays during his lifetime, many of which are still being performed today, such as Romeo and Juliet or Hamlet.*

