



The Myth of the Renaissance in Europe

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10/24/13 BBC

The idea that man simply 're-found' himself during the European Renaissance ignores something quite fundamental. Jerry Brotton argues that important developments in trade and science, as well as contact with far-flung empires, were the real causes of this seismic cultural shift.

Michelet's Renaissance

The European Renaissance remains one of the most important but misunderstood events in the history of western culture. The term 'Renaissance' - referring to the revolution in cultural and artistic life that took place in Europe in the 15th and 16th centuries - was first applied as late as the 19th century, when the French historian Jules Michelet used it in his History of France of 1855.

The Renaissance '...went from Columbus to Copernicus, from Copernicus to Galileo, from the discovery of the earth to that of the heavens. Man re-found himself', according to Michelet. For him the voyages of Columbus in the 15th century, and the scientific achievements of Copernicus and Galileo in the 16th, defined a decisive shift from the narrow, religious world of the Middle Ages, and anticipated the modern world of science, technology and rationalism.

Michelet's invention of the Renaissance was refined and established by the Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt, in his book The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy (1860). For Burckhardt, the Renaissance was a specifically Italian phenomenon, nurtured in the city-states of the 15th century, where the artistic talents of the likes of Leonardo, Botticelli, Mantegna and Brunelleschi flourished.

Like Michelet, Burckhardt believed that the cultural achievements of the period heralded a 'rebirth' (the French 'renaissance') of the classical Greek and Roman values of literary purity and aesthetic beauty. Both these historians believed that the Renaissance represented a questioning of religious authority, and a new spirit of artistic experimentation and scientific curiosity, which would ultimately give birth to modern, secular man (according to this perspective, there was little space for women in the Renaissance).

The myth of the Renaissance

Until very recently, this invention of the European Renaissance has remained a powerful and seductive myth, which has ignored much of what was truly revolutionary about this extraordinary period in European history. The problem with the approach of both Michelet and Burckhardt to the Renaissance is that it reflected their own 19th-century world, characterised by European imperialism, industrial expansion, the decline of the church, and a romantic vision of the role of the artist in society.

Neither of these writers explored how trade, finance, science and exchange with other cultures decisively shaped what they saw as the cultural flowering of the European Renaissance. Only now, in our more complex and interdependent global world, has it become possible to piece together a much more complex and dynamic picture of what really drove the cultural accomplishments of this remarkable period.



Michelangelo's David, Galleria dell'Accademia, Florence

What underpinned all the great artistic, literary and architectural achievements that we now see as quintessentially 'Renaissance' was an equally momentous revolution in trade and finance. Ever since the Crusades of the 12th century, a politically fragmented and economically undeveloped Europe looked to the cultures of the east for luxury, wealth and new ways of doing business.

A revolution in trade and finance

Early European maps show North Africa and what we would today call the Middle East at the heart of the known world. This was where Spanish and Italian merchants travelled to purchase the luxury goods, like silk, spices and ceramics, that would transform the homes and palaces of Christian Europe.

The bazaars of the east also taught European merchants new ways of doing business. As early as the very beginning of the 13th century, the Pisan merchant Leonardo Pisan, better known as Fibonacci, was travelling and trading throughout the Arabic east, where he gained the ability to calculate profit and loss using Hindu-Arabic numerals.

In his revolutionary book *Liber abbaci* (1202) he introduced Europe to the Arabic methods of subtraction, addition and multiplication, explaining how he was 'marvellously instructed in the Arabic-Hindu numerals and calculation', and how they helped him in his business. Other European merchants openly traded with Muslim, African and Hindu businessmen, regardless of religious and cultural difference.

Europeans also learned the commercial usefulness of algebra from the Persian astronomer al-Khowarizmi, and adopted the word 'cheque' from the Arabic 'sakk'. International finance became increasingly liquid and intricate during the 13th, 14th and 15th centuries, and Florentine merchants based in the Medici bank opened offices throughout the east from the early 15th century onwards. They used 'bills of exchange', forerunners of the modern cheque, to secure lucrative contracts with Muslim merchants, who possessed the luxury objects desired by the élite of 15th-century Italy.

Art and culture



The Rialto Bridge and the Grand Canal, Venice

The result of this increasingly international trade revolutionised taste in Europe. Venice in particular benefited from its extensive contacts with the east, and it showed in the increasingly Oriental influence of the city's architecture. One Italian historian went so far as to claim that Venice came to

resemble 'a colossal suq', so indebted was its opulent building style to the commercially driven cities of Cairo, Alexandria, Damascus and Aleppo.

The impact was also felt on the art and culture of the 15th century. Religious and political commissions for altarpieces, frescoes and portraits of the rich and the powerful would often stipulate the amounts of expensive raw materials from the east that artists had to use to increase the opulence and grandeur of their creations.

Patrons drew up contracts with artists that specified the exact amounts of gold, silver, lapis lazuli and cochineal to be used in the painting. For many people, the splendour of the painting was reflected by the sheer amount of material expense lavished on its creation.

Opulence in art

The effect can be seen in much European art throughout the 15th century. A typical example is an altarpiece of the Madonna and Child, painted by the Italian artist Andrea Mantegna in the middle of the 15th century. It is a typically Renaissance image, but on closer inspection it reveals itself as made up of extremely expensive materials, as well as portraying a rich array of precious objects, most of them from the east.



Mantegna's Madonna and Child from the San Zeno altarpiece, La basilica di San Zeno, Verona

The Madonna is clothed in opulent eastern silk and velvet, and stands on an expensive Turkish carpet. The pillars are made of Egyptian porphyry. The children read from books with Mamluk (Egyptian) bindings. Around the Madonna's head is a band known as a 'tiraz', an Arabic inscription from the Koran. Even the pigments used by Mantegna emanated from raw materials indigenous to regions way to the east of Italy. The richness and lavish opulence of this typically Renaissance image emerged as a direct result of the commercial exchanges with overseas markets, most of them to the east of mainland Europe.

Much of the impetus for this lavish display of art came from the growth in international trade, but it was also the product of growing religious and political tensions of the time. Even in the 15th century, the Roman Catholic Church was in disarray, recovering from bitter in-fighting and factional schisms. Rome's classical architecture lay in ruins, and the builders and architects of the time looked towards the powerful eastern Christian Church based in Byzantium for their model of architectural grandeur and artistic brilliance.

Pope Nicholas V (reigned 1447-55) was an astute politician who ruthlessly suppressed dissenting voices to his rule. He embarked on an ambitious programme of building to celebrate the renewed sense of confidence that his strong papacy had brought to the Church, and this ultimately led to the great frescoes, statues, paintings and architectural achievements of Bramante, Michelangelo and Raphael in the 16th century.

Artistic and political achievements

Other Italian city-states also laid claim to political pre-eminence through the commissioning of hugely ambitious works of art. In Florence, the commercial power of the Medici family bankrolled Brunelleschi's dome (1437), Donatello's erotic statue David (c.1420s), and Benozzo Gozzoli's extraordinary frescoes depicting the Adoration of the Magi (1459), which adorned the walls of the Medici Palace. As well as triumphant artistic achievements, these creations all celebrated the political and financial power of the family that had commissioned them: the Medici.

But as the 15th century drew to a close, the political and commercial map of Europe was changing. In 1453 Constantinople, the great seat of the Christian Byzantine Empire, fell to the Islamic Ottoman Empire of Mehmed the Conqueror. In the wake of this conquest, Mehmed was soon to repopulate the city with Jewish, Arabic, Persian and African artists, writers and

scientists, as well as Christian and European scholars, in an attempt to rival the cultural and artistic pre-eminence of Rome, Florence and Venice.

Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) was so impressed that he offered to build a technically ambitious bridge for the Turkish authorities across the Bosphorus in Istanbul. In 1504 Leonardo wrote to Sultan Bayezid proposing a 350- metre bridge. 'I will erect it high as an arch', he wrote, 'so that a ship under full sail could sail underneath it'. But like so many of Leonardo's grandiose designs, it came to nothing.

As the military might of the Ottomans menaced the Italian states to the east and levied ever greater commercial taxes against its merchants, France also laid claim to the region, launching an invasion in 1494 that effectively destroyed Italy's commercial and artistic authority. Gradually, artists like Leonardo and Michelangelo fled the principalities and sought patronage at larger imperial courts. Leonardo tied himself to the growing power of France, and spent his last years working for the French king Francis I.

New worlds

The Renaissance began to take on a far more global shape, as artists like Albrecht Dürer and Hans Holbein developed their own artistic styles in northern Europe, and the voyages of discovery funded by the Spanish and Portuguese empires opened up new worlds in the western Atlantic and the Far East.

As the flow of exotic goods from east and west reached the markets of northern Europe, Dürer was one amongst many artists recording his delight at 'wonderful works of art, and I marvelled at the subtle ingeniousness of people in foreign lands'. He snapped up porcelain, parrots, sandalwood and coconuts, many of which he incorporated into his drawings and paintings, including his famous engraving of an Indian rhinoceros.

Brunelleschi's Dome, Florence



Just like Mantegna, Brunelleschi and Leonardo before him, Dürer was a worldly and inquisitive artist, who was intimately connected to the latest developments in trade, politics and science - and this is exactly what gives Renaissance art its vivid originality and technical brilliance. What we're left with is a vision of the Renaissance as a much dirtier, more worldly place than Michelet and Burckhardt believed, but this only adds to its singular importance in the history of western cultural life.