

Unit 1 – The Renaissance

The Northern Renaissance

DIRECTIONS: Read the following handout thoroughly, using a highlighter to highlight any important vocabulary/terms/names/events that you think might be historically important. Write a note in the margins next to the highlighted text that will help you remember the information.

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. Humanist writers expanded ideas about individuality. These ideas impressed scholars, students, and merchants who visited Italy. By the late 1400s, Renaissance ideas had spread to Northern Europe - especially England, France, Germany, and Flanders (now part of France and the Netherlands).

The Northern Renaissance Begins

By 1450 the population of northern Europe, which had declined due to bubonic plague, was beginning to grow again. When 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, as wealth increased in other parts of Northern Europe, patronage of artists increased as well.



Italy was divided into city-states, but in contrast, England and France were unified under strong monarchs. These rulers often sponsored the arts by purchasing paintings and by supporting artists and writers. For example, Francis I of France invited Leonardo da Vinci to retire in France, and hired Italian artists and architects to rebuild and decorate his castle at Fontainebleau. The castle became a showcase for Renaissance art.

As Renaissance ideas spread out of Italy, they mingled with northern traditions. As a result, the northern Renaissance developed its own character. For example, the artists were especially interested in realism. The Renaissance ideal of human dignity inspired some northern humanists to develop plans for social reform based on Judeo-Christian values.

Artistic Ideas Spread

In 1494, war raged through Italy from Naples in the south right through northern Italy. As the war dragged on, many Italian artists and writers left for a safer life in Northern Europe. They brought with them the styles and techniques of the Italian Renaissance. In addition, Northern European artists who studied in Italy carried Renaissance ideas back to their homelands.

German Painters

Perhaps the most famous person to do this was the German artist Albrecht Dürer. He traveled to Italy to study in 1494. After returning to Germany, Dürer produced woodcuts and engravings. Many of his prints portray religious subjects. Others portray classical myths or realistic landscapes. The popularity of Dürer's work helped to spread Renaissance styles.



Dürer's emphasis upon realism influenced the work of another German artist, Hans Holbein the Younger. Holbein specialized in painting portraits that are almost photographic in detail. He emigrated to England where he painted portraits of King Henry VIII and other members of the English royal family.

Flemish Painters

The support of wealthy merchant families in Flanders helped to make Flanders the artistic center of northern Europe. The first great Flemish Renaissance painter was Jan van Eyck. Van Eyck used recently developed oil-based paints to develop techniques that painters still use. 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. 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 the Elder. Bruegel was also interested in realistic details and individual people. He was very skillful in portraying large numbers of people. He captured scenes from everyday peasant life such as weddings, dances, and harvests. Bruegel's rich colors, vivid details, and balanced use of space give a sense of life and feeling.



The Flemish painter Pieter Bruegel's paintings provide information about peasant life in the 1500s. *Peasant Wedding* (1568) portrays a wedding feast.

- The Bride: She sits under the paper crown hanging on the green cloth.
- The Servers: Men who may be her brothers are passing out plates.
- The Guests: Several children have come to the party.
- The Musicians: They are carrying bagpipes. One glances hungrily at the food.

Northern Writers Try to Reform Society

Italian humanists were very interested in reviving classical languages and classical texts. When the Italian humanist ideas reached the north, people used them to examine the traditional teachings of the Church. The northern humanists were critical of the failure of the Christian Church to inspire people to live a Christian life. This criticism produced a new movement known as Christian humanism. The focus of Christian humanism was the reform of society. Of particular importance to humanists was education. The humanists promoted the education of women and founded schools attended by both boys and girls.

Christian Humanists

The best known of the Christian humanists were Desiderius Erasmus of Holland and Thomas More of England. The two were close friends.

In 1509, Erasmus wrote his most famous work, *The Praise of Folly*. This book poked fun at greedy merchants, heartsick lovers, quarrelsome scholars, and pompous priests. 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.



Thomas More tried to show a better model of society. In 1516, he wrote the book *Utopia*. In Greek, utopia means "no place." In English it has come to mean an ideal place as depicted in More's book. The book is about an imaginary land where greed, corruption, and war have been weeded out. In Utopia, because there was little greed, Utopians had little use for money:

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*

More wrote in Latin. As his work became popular, More's works were translated into a variety of languages including French, German, English, Spanish, and Italian.

Women's Reforms

During this period the vast majority of Europeans were unable to read or write. Those families who could afford formal schooling usually sent only their sons. One woman spoke out against this practice. Christine de Pizan was highly educated for the time and was one of the first women to earn a living as a writer. Writing in French, she produced many books, including short stories, biographies, novels, and manuals on military techniques. She frequently wrote about the objections men had to educating women. In one book, *The Book of The City of Ladies*, she wrote:



I am amazed by the opinion of some men who claim that they do not want their daughters, wives, or kinswomen to be educated because their mores [morals] would be ruined as a result. . . . Here you can clearly see that not all opinions of men are based on reason and that these men are wrong.

CHRISTINE DE PIZAN, *The Book of The City of Ladies*

Christine de Pizan was one of the first European writers to question different treatment of boys and girls. However, her goal of formal education for children of both sexes would not be achieved for several centuries.

The Elizabethan Age

The Renaissance spread to England in the mid-1500s. The period was known as the Elizabethan Age, after Queen Elizabeth I. Elizabeth reigned from 1558 to 1603. She was well educated and spoke French, Italian, Latin, and Greek. She also wrote poetry and music. As queen she did much to support the development of English art and literature.

William Shakespeare

The most famous writer of the Elizabethan Age was William Shakespeare. 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, and soon he would be performing at the Globe Theater.

Like many Renaissance writers, Shakespeare revered the classics and drew on them for inspiration and plots. 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. Many of these plays examine human flaws. However, Shakespeare also had one of his characters deliver a speech that expresses the Renaissance's high view of human nature:



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* (Act 2, Scene 2)

Shakespeare's most famous plays include the tragedies *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *King Lear*, and the comedies *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Taming of the Shrew*.

Printing Spreads Renaissance Ideas

The Chinese invented block printing, in which a printer carved words or letters 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. The Chinese writing system contains thousands of different characters, so most Chinese printers found movable type impractical. However, the method would prove practical for Europeans because their languages have a very small number of letters in their alphabets.

Gutenberg Improves the Printing Process

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, information, and books.

Global Impact

The Printing Press

Many inventions are creative combinations of known technologies. In 1452, Johann Gutenberg combined known technologies from Europe and Asia with his idea for molding movable type to create a printing press that changed the world.

Screw-type Press
An adaptation of Asian olive-oil presses made a workable printing press.

Movable Type
Letters that could be put together in any fashion and reused was a Chinese idea.

Paper Using paper mass-produced by Chinese techniques, rather than vellum (calf or lambskin), made printing books possible.

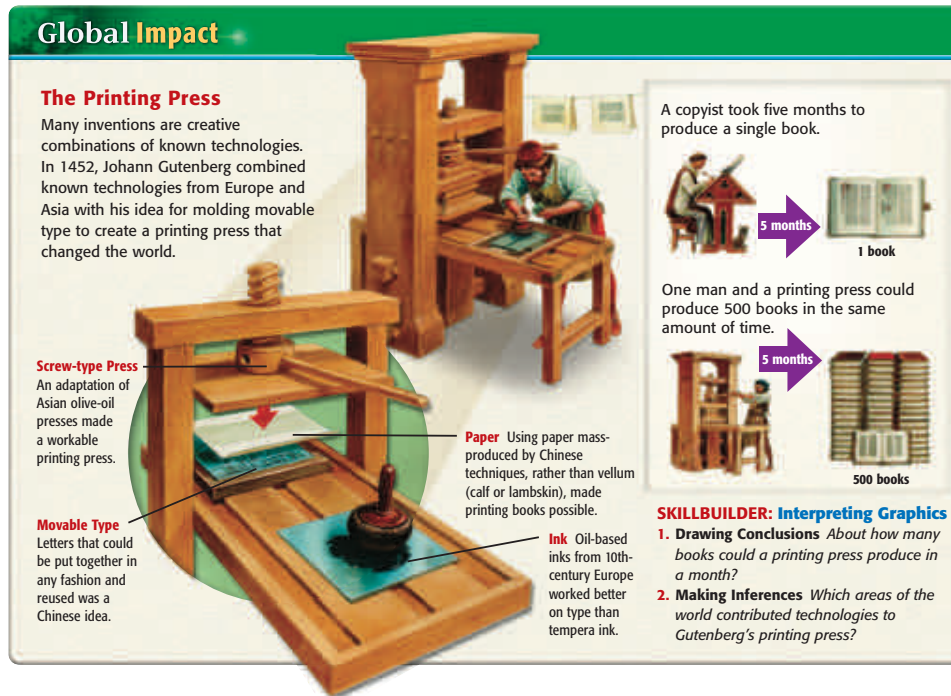
Ink Oil-based inks from 10th-century Europe worked better on type than tempera ink.

A copyist took five months to produce a single book.

One man and a printing press could produce 500 books in the same amount of time.

SKILLBUILDER: Interpreting Graphics

- 1. Drawing Conclusions** About how many books could a printing press produce in a month?
- 2. Making Inferences** Which areas of the world contributed technologies to Gutenberg's printing press?



Around 1440 Johann Gutenberg, a craftsman from Mainz, Germany, developed a printing press that incorporated a number of technologies in a new way. The process made it possible to produce books quickly and cheaply. Using this improved process, Gutenberg printed a complete Bible, the Gutenberg Bible, in about 1455. It was the first full-sized book printed with movable type.

The printing press enabled a printer to produce hundreds of copies of a single work. For the first time, books were cheap enough that many people could buy them. At first printers produced mainly religious works. Soon they began to provide books on other subjects such as travel guides and medical manuals.

The Legacy of the Renaissance

The European Renaissance was a period of great artistic and social change. It marked a break with the medieval-period ideals focused around the Church. The Renaissance belief in the dignity of the individual played a key role in the gradual rise of democratic ideas. Furthermore, the impact of the movable-type printing press was tremendous. Some historians have suggested that its effects were even more dramatic than the arrival of personal computers in the 20th century.

Changes in the Arts

- Art drew on techniques and styles of classical Greece and Rome.
- Paintings and sculptures portrayed individuals and nature in more realistic and lifelike ways.
- Artists created works that were secular as well as those that were religious.
- Writers began to use vernacular languages to express their ideas.
- The arts praised individual achievement.

Changes in Society

- Printing changed society by making more information available and inexpensive enough for society at large.
- A greater availability of books prompted an increased desire for learning and a rise in literacy throughout Europe.
- Published accounts of new discoveries, maps, and charts led to further discoveries in a variety of fields.
- Published legal proceedings made the laws clear so that people were more likely to understand their rights.
- Christian humanists' attempts to reform society changed views about how life should be lived.
- People began to question political structures and religious practices.