

The Renaissance

The Renaissance refers to a time period in European history in which cultural ideas and motivations developed and changed from those traditionally found in the Middle Ages. The term Renaissance is a French word which means “rebirth,” and was first used by an art critic in the mid-1500s. Historians believe that the Renaissance movement started in Italy due to political and cultural conditions that favored learning and inspired men to re-evaluate the classics. Generally, historians mark the period as lasting between 1300 and 1600 CE. During this period, many wonderful works were created in the fields of literature, art, and philosophy. These fields came to be known as the humanities.

One of the key concepts of the Renaissance was the humanist movement of learning. This was a method of learning that the Renaissance thinkers felt was successful and important and had been used by ancient Romans like Cicero (106 BCE – 43 CE). This return to the way the classical thinkers approached study is one of the reasons why the Renaissance is considered a rebirth or a return. This educational movement emphasized the literary study of classical texts and encouraged students to study texts from all over the world rather than just their own states or countries. Renaissance thinkers regarded Cicero highly, and they studied his works. His works influenced their own ideas and works. This humanist method placed great importance on personal dignity and values.

Another important concept of the Renaissance was the importance of experience and feeling of a person. The Renaissance artists and writers believed that the study and expression of a person's experiences was just as important as a person's knowledge. The best way to share experiences and feelings was to write in one's own language and not in Latin. This contrasted with the Middle Ages' texts, which were usually on religion or philosophy and always in a complex style of Latin. Petrarch was an Italian poet and writer who lived at the beginning of the Renaissance period. He wrote many sonnets and poems which spoke about his love for a girl named Laura. His famous works are examples of a Renaissance writer who wanted to share his feelings in his native language (Italian). Another example is that of Dante Alighieri, who was from Florence, Italy. He wrote a very famous work called the *Divine Comedy* in his Italian dialect. This major work is written in the first-person and focuses on the narrator's travels through the afterlife with Virgil, one of his guides.

These concepts played a role in changing the style of art that was typical through the Middle Ages. In the Renaissance, paintings, frescos (paintings done on the plaster of walls or ceilings), and sculptures were common. Renaissance art is filled with examples of the human body. Unlike the art from previous time periods, the human body was not two-dimensional, or flat, and it did not show people as motionless. Artists began to experiment with depicting people as active and energetic. Their works make the people seem three-dimensional. The humanist concept influenced art because now artists painted or sculpted people with intricate facial expressions, and they paid great attention to body posture.

The Renaissance (Cont'd)

In other words, the artists tried to make their works seem full of personality and liveliness. There are hundreds of examples, but one is that of Michelangelo's *David*. It is a very large marble statue that was sculpted with a lot of attention to detail and displays David's keen gaze and his physical beauty. Another example is Leonardo Da Vinci's painting: *Mona Lisa*. In this painting, a woman is portrayed with a unique facial expression and with a detailed dress. Her hands also seem to be full of energy and life.

Politics was another area to which the Renaissance movement contributed. Thinkers like Marsilio Ficino, Niccolo Machiavelli, and Michel de Montaigne wrote many works that changed the overall opinion of government. Instead of the Church-dominated rule of states, thinkers like these men encouraged rulers to be more independent of the Church and to become patrons of the scholars and artists in their states. Writing on different aspects of politics, these men focused on the motivations and feelings involved in politics rather than the nature and authority of laws. Machiavelli's famous work *The Prince* is a short treatise instructing a ruler on the most effective way to govern. Instead of discussing complex legal matters, Machiavelli wrote frankly about the realistic struggles that a prince faces.

The Medici's were a family in Florence, Italy, that represented many of the Renaissance ideals. They educated their children in the humanities style that was fundamental to the Renaissance. When these children became adults, they fostered the same ideals. They were supporters of artists, writers, and scientists. Notably, they were at some point patrons of Da Vinci, Michelangelo, and Galileo. The Medici family also formed and maintained the Medici Bank. This helped them become one of the richest families in Europe. Naturally, their wealth contributed to the success of Florence and its residents. Three members of the family also became popes, which showed the family's ability to gain power and prestige.

The Renaissance period was filled with many important individuals who each contributed to the cultural movement. Even in their different fields, they all showed their understanding for emphasizing the human person and for expressing human knowledge beyond the confines of the Middle Ages.

Name _____

Date _____

The Renaissance Questions

Multiple Choice:

1. Petrarch was:
 - a. a French banker
 - b. a Turkish prince
 - c. an Italian poet
 - d. a Russian artist

2. "Renaissance" is a French word that means:
 - a. art
 - b. rebirth
 - c. painting
 - d. book

3. Michelangelo sculpted a statue of:
 - a. David
 - b. Petrarch
 - c. Dante
 - d. Da Vinci

4. The Renaissance movement began in this country:
 - a. Spain
 - b. Greece
 - c. France
 - d. Italy

5. Paintings done on the plaster of walls or ceilings are called:
 - a. florences
 - b. frescoes
 - c. sculptures
 - d. molds

True or False:

- ___ 3. Michelangelo painted the *Mona Lisa*.
- ___ 4. Dante wrote the *Divine Comedy*.
- ___ 5. The Renaissance period lasted from 1300 to 1600 CE.
- ___ 6. Machiavelli's famous work *The Prince* is a short treatise instructing a ruler on the most effective way to govern.
- ___ 7. The Medici family was one of the poorest families in Europe.

The Renaissance Answers

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