

Renaissance Accomplishments

Knowledge of the ancient world transformed Europe in the 14th century and continues to shape **Western civilization**¹ today. The first experiment with democracy began with ancient Greece. The idea of human rights or a person should be considered innocent before proven guilty reflects certain Roman virtues tied to personal liberty and freedom. Both Greece and Rome were literate societies. This means most Romans and Greeks could read compared to medieval Europe where most could not. The Greeks greatest contribution to Western civilization is **rationalism**.² The Greeks did not explain storms or disasters by appealing to the will of the gods. Instead, Greek rationalists explained what they saw by appealing to the idea of natural processes. The Greeks were the first genuinely scientific civilization. During the Renaissance Greek rationalism and Roman law combined inspiring a new worldview to develop called **humanism**.³ Humanism formed the basis of the Renaissance's *zeitgeist*.⁴ The Renaissance contrasted markedly with the medieval period, in that, medieval thinking tended to stress humanity's imperfections the Renaissance stressed humanity's prospects for progress and goodness. The Renaissance began in Northern Italy and spread from there to the rest of Western Europe.

RENAISSANCE ART

Medieval artists were concerned with symbolism not realism in painting. If you look at the example painting on the next page, you can see medieval painters did not worry about presenting human figures or buildings realistically. Rather, they painted important people extra big and less important people small (because *importance* not *reality* was being represented). Again, medieval painters were symbolists. They focused primarily upon the *meaning* of something and nothing else. They also tended to paint biblical themes in order to glorify God.

¹ The culture of the "West" is a term which refers to the philosophy, art, music, ideas, etc. of Germany, France, England, Spain and Italy. The term also includes the countries of North America.

² Rationalism: a belief or theory that opinions and actions should be based on reason and knowledge rather than on religious belief or emotional response.

³ Humanism: a worldview attaching primary importance to human rather than divine or supernatural matters. Humanists stressed the potential value and goodness of human beings (quite unlike the medieval worldview which considered humanity fallen, sinful and broken).

⁴ Zeitgeist: (literally "spirit of the time" in German) the defining spirit or mood of a particular period of history as shown by the ideas and beliefs of the time.

Renaissance artists focused on representing the world realistically. If you were a pope they did not paint you the size of King Kong to indicate your symbolic importance. Popes and poor people were painted the same size. This is because Renaissance painters developed and followed the **rules of perspective**.⁵ Renaissance sculptors and painters focused upon themes related to human beauty, goodness and stories drawn from Roman and Greek mythology.

Renaissance painters like El Greco portrayed the human form with ever increasing accuracy. This was possible because of improvements in our understanding of human anatomy. These improvements were made possible due to the work of creative people like **Andreas Vesalius**⁶ (1514-1564 AD), Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519 AD) and Michelangelo (1475-1564 AD).



LITERATURE

Writers like Desiderius Erasmus placed a lot of value on **Classical literature**.⁷ During the Middle Ages, literature tended to focus on **metaphysics**⁸ and praising God; however, during the Renaissance

⁵ Rules of Perspective: in medieval art people in the back or front of a painting were the same size; however, Renaissance artists would paint the person in the back as smaller compared to the person in the front. This made the painting look more realistic. Also, if you look at the medieval painting at the bottom left you can see how large the people are against the backdrop of the city. The scale of the city compared to the scale of the mounted riders is all wrong. Either the riders need to be a lot smaller or the gate a lot bigger to accurately reflect reality.

⁶ Vesalius' work had a similar impact as Erasmus' on human understanding. By dissecting human bodies Vesalius disproved a number of traditional teachings about the human body: for example, Vesalius demonstrated men and women have the same number of ribs. This might not seem all that important of a thing to prove to a modern audience; however, in the 16th century people believed the story of Adam and Eve was literally true, e.g. God used one of Adam's ribs to make Eve. The Church, therefore, taught that men had one less rib than women (a belief Vesalius disproved and which led to accusations of his being an atheist).

⁷ Classical literature was any poem, story or history produced by either the ancient Greeks and Romans.

⁸ Metaphysics (literally means "after or beyond physics" in Greek) is a branch of philosophy concerned with explaining the assumed nature of souls, spirits, God, sin, and so on. The main method used in metaphysics is deduction. For example the

literature shifted away from a focus on religion to a focus on humanism. For example, humanist texts described humankind's potential for good and capacity for creativity. Renaissance thinking reflected *goodness* as opposed to the medieval tendency to stress *sinfulness*. The influence of humanism was not restricted to just intellectuals. The Renaissance period is associated with an explosion in public literacy levels (this means an increasing number of regular people could read and write). Increased literacy levels were made possible because of the introduction of the printing press to Europe in 1440 by Johannes Gutenberg. The **Gutenberg Press** made it possible to mass produce books. Mass production meant books could be produced for cheaper. Therefore you did not have to be super rich in order to afford to buy a book any longer. Information previously unavailable to the general public suddenly became widely available. Greater public literacy meant more people held increasingly sophisticated views of the world. This sophistication made social, religious, and cultural change not only possible but inevitable. Knowledge, after all, is revolutionary and a source of power.

PHILOSOPHY

The defining feature of the Renaissance was the philosophy of humanism. Humanism, quite unlike Christianity, did not promote the idea people were by nature sinful. Instead, humanism encouraged people to live virtuously, to pursue knowledge for its own sake, and test religious beliefs through the filter of **reason**.⁹ With that said, humanists were not atheists; they were Christian scholars who wanted to break the hold the Catholic Church had on free-thinking. **Marguerite de Navarre**¹⁰ is an example of someone who was both a devout believer and a humanist.

Humanism as a philosophy is distinct from **medieval scholasticism**¹¹ (the most important school of thought during the medieval period). Scholastics were defenders of official Church teachings. Humanists, on the other hand, were more than willing to challenge Church doctrine and teachings.

Catholic Church deduced since no sin ever took place on the Moon it must have a perfect surface. The Earth though had lots of sin on it and therefore had imperfections like mountains and valleys. Metaphysics is inherently unreliable because it asserts spiritual forces are at work instead of known material forces.

⁹ Reason: the power of the mind to think, understand, and form judgements by a process of logic.

¹⁰ Marguerite of Navarre (1492-1549 CE) received a thorough humanist education as a young girl. She spoke multiple languages and was well-acquainted with the philosophy of her day. She was well-versed in both history and theology. She wrote a number of works exploring the importance and significance of the Catholic Church reforming itself. She was the wife of the King of Navarre using her court as a safe place to discuss controversial ideas.

¹¹ Scholasticism: the system of theology and philosophy taught in medieval European universities based on Aristotle's philosophy and the writings of the early Church Fathers (like St. Augustine). Scholastics emphasized the importance of maintaining tradition and believing in dogma. Scholasticism is widely considered to be a 'narrow-minded' because of its focus on unquestionably accepting traditional doctrine.

EDUCATION

Humanism became the basis of education in Italy eventually spreading to the rest of Europe. Humanists believed human beings could improve themselves through education. Their belief in the power of education to transform people to become better was the basis of a later intellectual movement called the Enlightenment.

Schools were created to promote human improvement. The foundation of a humanist education was the study of the liberal arts. Students studied philosophy, history, rhetoric (debate), writing, mathematics, music and astronomy. Some schools also incorporated archery, dancing, hunting and swimming. The overall objective of a humanist education was to help students develop a "sound mind" (or the ability to think and talk intelligently about multiple subjects). A second objective of humanist education was to assist people develop in to individuals capable of helping their communities.

Humanist schools combined the study of Christianity and Classical literature to produce a model of education throughout all of Europe. Children who attended humanist schools tended to be from upper-class families; however, the education of poorer students was often paid for by patrons (wealthy supporters), city councils or the school's themselves.

SCIENCE

Improvements in science and engineering were made during the Renaissance. New and exciting discoveries were made primarily in the areas of anatomy, astronomy and physics. Breakthroughs in engineering paved the way for many of the world's most significant inventions such as telescopes, clocks and eye glasses.

CONCLUSION

The Renaissance transformed the way people looked at themselves and the world. Gone were the days when people looked to superstition and mystery to explain the world; arrived now was a time (*zeitgeist*) when people sought rational explanations for why things were the way they were. Remarkably, people started seeing it was genuinely possible to live a fulfilling life without being religious. Some people embraced the idea of living a life of the mind; also, people started viewing humanity no longer as fallen but as something worthy of study, love, beauty and respect.