

Introduction to the Renaissance: Why Italy?

Renaissance

The term, in French, literally means "rebirth," in this case the rebirth of classical Greek and Roman culture. It began in Italy in the 1300s, picked up speed in the 1400s, and reached its zenith (peak) in the 1500s. It began in Italy.

1. *Italy's geographic location.* Renaissance Italy was drawing upon the civilizations of ancient Greece and especially Rome, upon whose ruins it was literally sitting. During the Middle Ages, Italians had neglected and abused their Roman heritage, even stripping marble and stone from Roman buildings for their own constructions. However, by the late Middle Ages, they were becoming more aware of the Roman civilization surrounding them. Italy was also geographically well placed for contact with the Byzantines and Arabs who had preserved classical culture. Both of these factors combined to make Italy well suited to absorb the Greek and Roman heritage.
2. *The recent invention of the printing press spread new ideas quickly and accurately.* This was especially important now since many Renaissance ideas were not acceptable to the Church. However, with the printing press, these ideas were very hard to suppress.
3. *Renaissance Italy, like the ancient Greeks, thrived in the urban culture and vibrant economy of the city-state.* This helped in two ways. First, the smaller and more intimate environment of the city-state, combined with the freedom of expression found there, allowed a number of geniuses to flourish and feed off one another's creative energies. Unfortunately, the city-state could also be turbulent and violent, as seen in the riot scene that opens Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Secondly, the Italian city-states, especially trading and banking centers such as Venice and Florence, provided the money to patronize the arts. Therefore, the wealth and freedom of expression thriving in the urban culture of Italy both helped give birth to the Renaissance.

New patterns of thought

Whether one sees the Renaissance as a period of originality or just drawing upon older cultures, it did generate four ideas that have been and still are central to Western Civilization: secularism, humanism, individualism, and skepticism.

1. *Secularism* comes from the word "secular," meaning of this world. Medieval civilization had been largely concerned with religion and the next world. The new economic and political horizons and opportunities that were opening up for Western Europe in the High and Late Middle Ages got people more interested in this world. During the Renaissance people saw this life as worth living for its own sake, not just as preparation for the next world. The art in particular exhibited this secular spirit, showing detailed and accurate scenery, anatomy, and nature, whereas medieval artists generally ignored such things since their paintings were for the glory of God. This is not to say that Renaissance people had lost faith in God. Religion was still the most popular theme for paintings. But during the Renaissance people found other things worth living for besides the afterlife.
2. *Humanism* goes along with secularism in that it makes human beings, not God, the center of attention. Renaissance art, which portrayed the human body as a thing of beauty in its own right, was the opposite of the medieval "comic strip" character whose only reason to exist was for the glory of God. Along those lines, Renaissance philosophers saw humans as intelligent creatures capable of reason (and questioning authority) rather than being mindless

pawns helplessly manipulated by God. Even the term for Renaissance philosophers, "humanists," shows how the focus of peoples' attention had shifted from Heaven and God to this world and human beings. It also described the group of scholars who drew upon the more secular Greek and Roman civilizations for inspiration.

3. *Individualism* takes humanism a step further by saying that individual humans were capable of great accomplishments. The more communal, group oriented society and mentality of the Middle Ages was giving way to a belief in the individual and his achievements. The importance of this was that it freed remarkable individuals and geniuses, such as Leonardo da Vinci to live up to their potential without being held back by a medieval society that discouraged innovation. Besides the outstanding achievements of Leonardo, one sees individualism expressed in a wide variety of ways during the Renaissance. Artists started signing their paintings, thus showing individualistic pride in their work. Also, the more communal guild system was being replaced by the more individualistic system of capitalism, which encouraged private enterprise.
4. *Skepticism*, which promoted curiosity and the questioning of authority, was largely an outgrowth of the other three Renaissance ideas. The secular spirit of the age naturally put Renaissance humanists at odds with the Church and its purely religious values and explanations of the universe. Humanism and individualism, with their belief in the ability of human reason, raised challenges to the Church's authority and theories, which in turn led to such things as the Protestant Reformation, the Age of Exploration and the Scientific Revolution, all of which would radically alter how Western Europe views the world and universe.

These four new ideas of secularism, humanism, individualism, and skepticism led to innovations in a variety of fields during the Renaissance, the most prominent being literature and learning; art; science; the Age of Exploration; and the Protestant Reformation.

Questions (answer on a separate piece of paper with your name, period, and "May 4 Classwork" on it).

1. How did the culture of ancient Rome influence Italian city-states?
2. What was the significance of the invention of the printing press?
3. How did the growth of Italian city-states further the Renaissance spirit?
4. In what ways was secularism a huge departure from the medieval way of thinking?
5. How did Renaissance art reflect secular thinking?
6. Define "humanism" in your own words.
7. What were some ways individualism was expressed in the Renaissance?
8. Why would church leaders be suspicious of skepticism?
9. What were some of the cultural achievements that resulted from the four Renaissance movements?