

# The Renaissance

## ***Overview – the Beginning of a New Age***

In the 14th and 15th centuries, people started to adopt a new outlook on the world around them and tried to expand their limited horizons. Architects, sculptors and painters took up a new interest in the works of Greek and Roman antiquity. Scholars who called themselves humanists\* (from Latin “humanum”) turned to reading the books of Greek and Roman authors. This rebirth of classical civilization is called the Renaissance.\*

5 Scientists began to discover the secrets of nature. Their method was observation by experiment. New discoveries were made in the fields of astronomy, medicine, geography, printing and warfare. As a consequence, people’s ways of life changed.

Beginning in Northern Italy with city-states such as Florence or Venice as centres, the Renaissance spread to the rest of Europe by the 17th century. All in all, the Renaissance can be regarded as a cultural movement that profoundly changed intellectual life in Europe. That is the reason why historians consider the Renaissance to be the beginning of modern history.

## ***Humanism – the Revival of Antiquity***

Renaissance thinkers turned to the past to look for inspiration. They studied ancient texts in their original languages, mostly Greek and Latin. By studying the classics, humanists hoped that they might be able to understand people and the secular world (i.e. the here and now) better. This distinguished them from medieval scholars who rather looked forward to the afterlife (i.e. the next world after death).

Famous humanists such as Petrarch (1304-1374), who is often called the “Father of Humanism,” copied or re-created ancient classical styles in literature, art and architecture. Still today, literature, history, philosophy, religion, the study of languages, art and music are called the humanities.\*

## ***Art – Depicting the Beauty of Nature***

One of the characteristic features of Renaissance art is that it is more realistic, more lifelike, than medieval art. Renaissance artists developed the linear perspective,\* in other words, they showed how different things look when they are close to or far away from the beholder. That is what makes their paintings seem to have depth or appear three-dimensional.

The reason for this change in artistic methods was the desire to show the beauty of nature which had mostly been ignored by artists of the Middle Ages. This desire is clearly shown by the works of famous Renaissance painters and sculptors such as Leonardo, Michelangelo, Raphael, Botticelli, Donatello and Titian.

## ***Science and the Scientific Method***

The changes in art and literature were accompanied by a period of comprehensive change in science. Many historians believe that this scientific revolution\* initiated the Modern Age. Numerous discoveries were made in the fields of mathematics, physics, chemistry, mechanics, astronomy and medicine.

In 1543, the Polish scholar Nicolaus Copernicus (1473–1543) suggested that the sun rather than the earth was the centre of the universe. His heliocentric model\* is regarded as the starting point of modern astronomy and stimulated further scientific investigation.

Renaissance scientists developed the scientific method\* (such as Francis Bacon in his famous book *Novum Organum*, “New Instrument”, 1620): First they would observe something very carefully to find out everything they could about it. Then they would make a theory which explained what the thing was made of or how it

worked. After that they would test the theory carrying out experiments. If the experiments suited the theory it became a law of science.

## **Leonardo da Vinci – the Universal Genius**

The idea that art and science are not mutually exclusive is best illustrated by the term “homo universalis”\* (Latin for “universal man or genius”), which describes a person who is well educated in a wide variety of fields or subjects. The idea that - as the famous humanist Alberti (1404-1472) put it - “a man can do all things if he will”  
5 inspired people to develop skills in all areas of knowledge.

The Renaissance concept of the universal genius – with an all-round education – was ideally personified by Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519). He excelled in the humanities, natural sciences, engineering, medicine and art and he was a gifted inventor as well.

## **Machiavelli and Political Thought**

10 Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527) was an Italian political philosopher of the Renaissance who is considered to be one of the main founders of modern political science. He tried to describe politics as it was in reality and thought about ways to improve government on the basis of reason.

In 1514, Machiavelli wrote *Il Principe* (“The Prince”) which he intended to be an instruction book for rulers. He advised them to do anything necessary for the well-being of the state, even if this meant to break their  
15 promises or behave cruelly towards their people: “Since love and fear can hardly exist together, if we must choose between them, it is far safer to be feared than loved.

Today Machiavelli’s ideas are seen as an early example of “realpolitik”,\* while at the same time many people regard his political credo (“The means justify the ends”) as extremely immoral. The adjective “Machiavellian”\* is therefore used to describe brutal and unscrupulous behaviour displayed by politicians,  
20 interest groups etc.

## **The Voyages of Discovery**

In the second half of the 15th century, European explorers set forth on overseas voyages of discovery\* which would take them far beyond the world they had already known. They were motivated by the desire to expand their limited geographical knowledge. At the same time, however, they were searching for trading partners and particular trade goods such as gold, silver and spices which could be found mostly in Asia. Unfortunately, the  
25 land link between Europe and Asia had been cut off when the Turks defeated the Eastern Roman Empire in 1453. Thus a sea route to Asia had to be found.

In 1488, a Portuguese explorer named Bartholomew Diaz (c. 1450-1500) was the first European to sail around the southern tip of Africa, while his countryman Vasco da Gama (c. 1460-1524) managed the first voyage around Africa ten years later: he arrived in Calicut on 20 May 1498.

30 Christopher Columbus (1451-1506), a Genoese captain, tried a different approach: he hoped to reach India by sailing west rather than east. When he came to a group of islands across the Atlantic Ocean in 1492, he was absolutely certain to have reached his goal. He called the natives “Indians,” unaware of the fact that he had really discovered a new continent which later became known as “America.” Columbus’s discovery initiated the Spanish colonization of America and foreshadowed the European colonization which started in the 17th century.

35 Columbus died believing in the idea that the world was round. But this theory was not confirmed until the expedition of the Portuguese Ferdinand Magellan (c. 1480-1521), the first captain whose ship sailed completely around the world in 1519-1522.

## ***Weapons and Warfare***

The period of the Renaissance was a time of unrest and war. An important change in warfare came about with the introduction of gunpowder and the development of weapons that could use explosives. Gunpowder had been invented in China in the 9th century and then found its way into Eastern Europe. Later it arrived into Central and Western Europe following the Crusades. Around the year 1350 Europeans were already using firearms in battle.

5        The introduction of artillery brought new problems for people who were trying to defend their castles. When, for example, the Turks captured the city of Constantinople from the Christians in 1453, they used cannons to destroy the walls of the city. The days of the classic castle designs were over once and for all.

10        In order to fend off bombardment,\* Italian engineers developed star-shaped fortresses\* (known as the “trace italienne”) with thick sloping walls, which would either absorb or deflect cannon fire. Once these walls were built, it was possible to defend oneself against a very long siege. Wars became longer and large numbers of soldiers were needed to fight them.

## ***Gutenberg and the Invention of Printing***

The ideas of Renaissance thinkers would not have spread that easily if it had not been for a small invention that changed history: around 1439, the German goldsmith Johannes Gutenberg (14th c.-1468) invented the printing press. This machine allowed him to use movable type\* in such a way that printed material could be easily mass-produced. Before the printing press, it took ages to copy a book by hand and few people except the clergy could read anyway; now with many inexpensive books available, literacy quickly increased.

15        Although some clergymen and government officials objected to book printing because they feared to lose their monopoly on passing information to the public, Gutenberg’s printing technology spread rapidly throughout Europe and is considered to be a key factor in the European Renaissance. Gutenberg has remained a popular figure until today; in 1999, he was voted “Man of the Millennium” by the readers of the newspaper USA TODAY who considered Gutenberg’s invention as the most important of the second millennium.

## ***Critical Evaluation***

Generally, historians agree that the Renaissance was the beginning of a new era, thus bringing an end to the Middle Ages. However, there has been a debate on whether the Renaissance can actually be seen as an improvement of medieval living conditions.

25        On the one hand, historians such as Jacob Burckhardt compare the modernization process started in the Renaissance to a “veil”\* which was removed from people’s eyes, thus allowing them to see the world around them more clearly.

30        On the other hand, other historians are of the opinion that the darkest aspects of medieval life – poverty, war and persecution – actually became worse at the time of the Renaissance, turning the idea of a “Golden Age” into a myth\* that should be removed from history books.

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