

Out of the Middle Ages 4 Renaissance

Why Italy?

In the middle of the sixteenth century, Italy was divided into about 200 city states. Each city state was made up of a powerful city that controlled the weaker towns and countryside that surrounded it. The city states raised their own taxes, made their own trade laws and built fortifications and defences. Some of these cities, such as Florence, were republics where the people had power and a say in how the city state was run and there was no monarchy. This type of government was very similar to that of Ancient Greece and Rome. The leaders of the city states were called signori and they had huge power which many passed on to their families. One of the most famous of the signori was Cosimo de'Medici. He became a patron of the arts (someone who gives backing and assistance, usually financial aid). Patronage was often given to glorify God as well as improve a patron's city because it enabled cathedrals and churches to be built and decorated

What was the Renaissance?

The Renaissance (French for "rebirth"; Italian: Rinascimento, from ri- "again" and nascere "be born") was a cultural movement that spanned roughly the 14th to the 17th century, beginning in Florence in the Late Middle Ages and later spreading to the rest of Europe. Traditionally, this intellectual transformation has resulted in the Renaissance being viewed as a bridge between the Middle Ages and the Modern era. Although the Renaissance saw revolutions in many intellectual pursuits, as well as social and political upheaval, it is perhaps best known for its artistic developments and the contributions of such polymaths as Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo, who inspired the term "Renaissance man". In the Middle Ages, people had looked to the Church as the source of all knowledge to guide and direct them. During the Renaissance, the Church still played an important part in people's lives, but scholars and intellectuals also looked back at the lives and teachings of the Ancient Greeks and Romans.

Why did it begin?

Various theories have been proposed to account for its origins and characteristics, focusing on a variety of factors including the social and civic peculiarities of Florence at the time; its political structure; the patronage of its dominant family, the Medici; and the migration of Greek scholars and texts to Italy following the Fall of Constantinople at the hands of the Ottoman Turks. One theory that has been advanced is that the devastation caused by the Black Death in Florence, resulted in a shift in the world view of people in 14th-century Italy. Italy was particularly badly hit by the plague, and it has been speculated that the familiarity with death that this brought caused thinkers to dwell more on their lives on Earth, rather than on spirituality and the afterlife. It has also been argued that the Black Death prompted a new wave of piety, manifested in the sponsorship of religious works of art. With the invention of the printing press around 1450 and increasing literacy amongst the population, the seeds were sown for future change. Established trade and sea links also meant that ideas developed in Italy, for example, could easily be printed and then sent to other parts of Europe.

Painting and sculpture

During the Middle Ages the subjects of paintings looked flat and lacked any feeling of movement. Sculptures were often shallow carvings, called bas-reliefs and were used to decorate walls and other stonework. Medieval artists focused on the religious meaning of their work and did not try to make their subjects appear life-like. Painters like Michelangelo (1475-1564), Raphael (1483-1520), Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) learned new techniques to make accurate drawings of people, animals and plants. Leonardo da Vinci even drew cut-up bodies so that he could learn the shape of the muscles under the skin and paint more realistic figures. Artists like Raphael adopted a new style in their work. Paintings now had perspective, which meant that objects in a picture looked the same in relation to each other as they did in real life. The rise of perspective gave the impression of distance and a feeling of depth to the painting. The Renaissance painters also developed the technique of using light and shade to make subjects appear solid. Renaissance sculpture went a step further! Inspired by Ancient Roman statues dug up from ruins, artists began to carve figures which could be viewed from any position - in the round.



The medieval and the modern. On the left a medieval image from the Paris Psalter, on the right Raphael's 'Betrothal of the Virgin'

Architecture

The Renaissance also influenced architecture because it renewed interest in the Classical style (the style of the Ancient Greeks and Romans). Architects in Florence started this process - one of the most famous was Filippo Brunelleschi (1377-1446). He was one of the first to bring the laws of perspective into practical use in the design of buildings. Most of his work was done in Florence - for example, the Foundlings Hospital and the cupola of the Duomo (cathedral see below). This great octagonal dome dominates the cathedral and the city. The Renaissance style of architecture, remarkable for its strong but graceful appearance, spread throughout Italy, following the work of Brunelleschi.

St Peter's Basilica in Rome

One of the most impressive Renaissance churches is St Peter's Basilica in Rome, the biggest Christian church in the world.



It was modelled on a Roman basilica and was started in AD 325. In 1506, Pope Julius II decided to rebuild it and had the original church demolished. The cost of rebuilding was very great and some of the money was raised through the selling of indulgences, something that Martin Luther criticised John Tetzel about in. (See S5 work!)

Science

As we have seen, the Renaissance brought with it a tide of change. For centuries, scientists and philosophers had accepted the work of Ancient Greek and Roman philosophers such as Aristotle and Plato, which they interpreted in the light of Christian belief. But now Renaissance astronomers now used the new scientific methods of experimenting and observation to study the skies. It was their sensational discoveries which shook European beliefs about the world.

The ancient Greek philosopher Pythagoras (c.570-495 BC) proved that the Earth was round and Aristarchus suggested that the Earth and planets revolved around the Sun. However, these ideas were replaced by Ptolemy's theories of the universe written in about AD100. Ptolemy was an Egyptian mathematician, astronomer and geographer who believed that the planets and stars all revolved around the Earth. This 'geocentric' theory fitted well with the Church's ideas of the heavens being a circle, because it was the 'perfect' shape. It also fitted with the idea of the Earth (God's creation), the Church and God himself being at the centre of the universe.

It wasn't until the beginning of the Renaissance in Europe that scientists and astronomers started to challenge existing theories about the orbit of the planets. One person who began to doubt Ptolemaic theory was Copernicus. Nicolaus Copernicus (1473-1543) was a Polish-German astronomer. He founded modern astronomy when, in 1543, he published his book *The Revolution of the Heavenly Orbs*. In it he said people should assume that the Earth moved around the Sun. This 'heliocentric' theory, which put the Sun not the Earth at the centre of the heavenly stage, aroused fierce religious opposition. Later scientists went on to prove scientifically that Copernicus' theories were correct.

Activities

1. Explain briefly what the Renaissance was and why it began in Italy when it did.
2. Explain the main differences between Medieval and Renaissance art and architecture.
3. Explain why Copernicus was such an important figure in the Renaissance and why he faced such opposition from the Roman Catholic Church.