

# The Electronic Passport to the Renaissance

## The Dawn of a New Age

About 1450, European scholars became more interested in studying the world around them. Their art became more true to life. They began to explore new lands. The new age in Europe was eventually called “the Renaissance.” Renaissance is a French word that means “rebirth.” Historians consider the Renaissance to be the beginning of modern history.

The Renaissance began in northern Italy and then spread through Europe. Italian cities such as Naples, Genoa, and Venice became centers of trade between Europe and the Middle East. Arab scholars preserved the writings of the ancient Greeks in their libraries. When the Italian cities traded with the Arabs, ideas were exchanged along with goods. These ideas, preserved from the ancient past, served as the basis of the Renaissance. When the Byzantine empire fell to Muslim Turks in 1453, many Christian scholars left Greece for Italy.

The Renaissance was much more than simply studying the work of ancient scholars. It influenced painting, sculpture, and architecture. Paintings became more realistic and focused less often on religious topics. Rich families became patrons and commissioned great art. Artists advanced the Renaissance style of showing nature and depicting the feelings of people. In Britain, there was a flowering in literature and drama that included the plays of William Shakespeare.



**Leonardo da Vinci's  
Mona Lisa(1503-1506)**

## Learning and the Arts began to flourish during the Renaissance.

- Crusaders returned to Europe with a newfound understanding of the world.
- The invention of the printing press encouraged literacy and helped to spread new ideas.
- Wealthy families and the church had amassed enough wealth to become patrons.
- The development of financial techniques such as bookkeeping and credit allowed merchants to prosper

## Humanism

Many Renaissance scholars looked to the past for inspiration. They studied the classics – the works of the ancient Greeks and Romans. In the works of the classics they found a spirit similar to theirs that valued innovation in this world rather than looking forward to the next world after death.

A person who studied the classics was called a humanist. Humanists recreated classical styles in art, literature, and architecture. Humanists believed that by studying the classics, they could understand people and the world better. One humanist wrote, “To each species of creature has been allotted a peculiar and instinctive gift. To horses galloping, to birds flying, comes naturally. To man only is given the desire to learn.”

The humanists emphasized the importance of human values instead of religious beliefs. Renaissance humanists were often devout Christians, but their promotion of secular, or non-religious, values often put them at odds with the church.

Today we refer to the study of literature, philosophy and art as the humanities. The civilizations of Greece and Rome ended long ago, but they continue to influence us today.

## Gutenberg

A good cook can take leftovers and turn them into a delicious meal. Like a good cook, Johann Gutenberg took what had already been discovered, and created a small invention that changed history. Gutenberg created a machine that allowed him to move small blocks of letters in such a way that written material could be printed and mass-produced. Before the printing press, few people outside the clergy could read, but with inexpensive books, literacy spread through Europe.

Block printing existed long before Gutenberg. The Chinese had been carving wood blocks to print books as early as 868, but their process had one major drawback; a new set of woodcuts had to be made for each book. Producing one book was difficult; producing a variety of books was not practical.

Writing ink dates from about 2500 BC in Egypt and China. They took the soot from fires and mixed it with sap. Later civilizations used plant material for ink, particularly the dark blue indigo plant. Gutenberg used an oil-based printing ink that would last longer than other inks used in his time.

We don't know much about Gutenberg because he was not famous during his lifetime. We know that he was born in Germany about 1400, and he worked as a goldsmith. In 1448, he developed engraved signatures for each number, letter, and punctuation mark. Gutenberg then built the molds to hold the signatures in place, and borrowed money to purchase a press.

Gutenberg published the first mass-produced book: a 1,282 page Bible. To this day, more copies of the Bible have been printed than any other book.

Copies of Gutenberg's invention spread throughout Europe, but Gutenberg did not get rich from his invention. Patents did not yet exist, so anybody could build a printing press without compensating Gutenberg for his inspiration. Some religious and government officials denounced the invention of printing because they feared that it would spread bad ideas. But they were a minority. By 1500 there were 1,700 printing presses in Europe. The presses had already produced about 20 million volumes of 40,000 different books.



Gutenberg used his printing press to create the world first mass-produced Bible

## City-states in Italy

During the Middle Ages, much of Italy was controlled by the Holy Roman Empire. As the emperors and popes fought for control, both were weakened. Several Italian cities formed states that were independent of both the empire and the church. Venice and Florence were two centers of power and wealth that became the cradle of the Renaissance.

Venice was founded in the fifth century by people fleeing from Attila the Hun. They settled on a group of islands on the northeastern edge of the Italian peninsula. Shipbuilding was the primary industry in Venice. During the Crusades, Venetian ships provided transportation to the Holy Land. By the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Venice was the most prosperous city in Europe. The city became rich by collecting taxes on all merchandise brought into its harbor. Venice built huge warships that protected the valuable cargo of its merchant ships from pirate raids. With the

vast wealth from trade, many of the leading families of Venice vied with one another to build the finest palaces or support the work of the greatest artists.

Florence, the “city of flowers,” was located in the hill country of north-central Italy. It prospered because of the wool industry. Sheep were raised in the rock hill country of central Italy, and Florence was a center of wool processing. During most of the Renaissance, wealthy merchants dominated Florence.

The merchants competed with one another by building grand palaces for themselves. The merchants were patrons of the arts. Patron comes from the Latin word for father. They hired artists to fill their homes with beautiful paintings and sculptures. Patrons bought rare books and paid scholars to teach their children. The money and encouragement of patrons together with that of the church, made the masterpieces of Renaissance art possible.

## The Medicis

In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the leading families of Florence decided they needed a strong person in charge to lead them against the growing threat of rival cities. They chose Cosimo de Medici, a wealthy banker, to take control of the government. Cosimo maintained the appearance of republican government, but he appointed his relatives and people he could control to important positions. When Cosimo died in 1464, his son and grandson continued his policies. The Medici

maintained control by exiling people who disagreed with them and encouraging other Italian cities to form alliances with Florence.

The best known of the Medicis was Cosimo’s grandson, Lorenzo, who was known as “Lorenzo the Magnificent.” Lorenzo was not only a shrewd banker and clever politician; he was also a scholar and a poet. Under Lorenzo’s leadership, Florence became one of the most beautiful and prosperous cities in Italy, as well as a center of the Renaissance.

## Social levels

The people of Renaissance Florence, like most city-states of the era, were composed of four social classes. The nobles owned much of the land, and lived on large estates outside the city walls. They behaved according to the rules of chivalry and distained the merchants.

The merchants were the newly rich, who gained wealth in industries like wool processing, boat making and banking. The merchants sought to protect their wealth by controlling the government and marrying into noble families. They became patrons of great artists in order to gain public favor. The middle class of Florence was composed of shopkeepers and professionals

At the lowest level were the workers, who did not have job protection and were very dependent on their employers. Workers who violated rules could have their wages withheld or could be discharged from their jobs. As difficult as their lives were, however, these urban workers were better off than the peasants who lived in rural areas.



**Giotto's Madonna in Glory (c. 1311)**

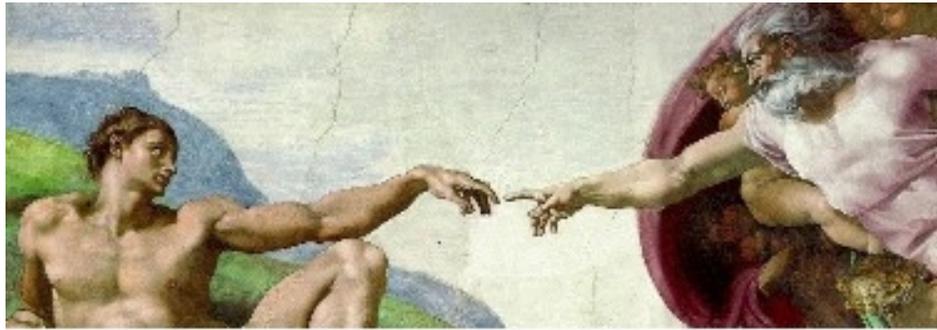
## Renaissance Art

The Renaissance patrons wanted art that showed joy in human beauty and life's pleasures. Renaissance art is more lifelike than in the art of the Middle Ages. Renaissance artists studied perspective, or the differences in the way things look when they are close to something or far away. The artists painted in a way that showed these differences. As a result, their paintings seem to have depth.

An artist from Florence named Giotto was one of the first to paint in this new style. Giotto lived more than a century before the beginning of the Renaissance, but his paintings show real emotion. The bodies look solid, and the background of his paintings shows perspective. The art produced during the Renaissance would build upon Giotto's style.

Leonardo da Vinci was born in 1452 in the village of Vinci. His name means Leonardo of Vinci. Leonardo began his career working for a master painter in Florence. By 1478, Leonardo left his master and set up his own workshop. People have been trying to guess the secret behind the smile of his *Mona Lisa* ever since he painted it around 1505. His *Last Supper* shows clearly the different feelings of Jesus and his followers.

Leonardo's fame grew—but not just for his painting. Leonardo was truly a



## Michelangelo's Creation of Adam

“Renaissance Man,” skilled in many fields. He was a scientist and an inventor as well as an artist. He made notes and drawings of everything he saw. Leonardo invented clever machines, and even designed imitation wings that he hoped would let a person fly like a bird.

Michelangelo Buonarroti of Florence was one of the greatest artists of all time. Like Leonardo, Michelangelo was a “Renaissance Man” of many talents. He was a sculptor, a painter, and an architect. When Michelangelo carved a statue of Moses, he included veins and muscles in the arms and legs.

Michelangelo was a devout Christian, and the church was his greatest patron. He designed the dome of St. Peter's church in Rome. Nearby, Michelangelo's paintings cover the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, the building where new popes have been selected for more than five hundred years. Michelangelo's painting illustrates the Book of Genesis, with scenes that span from the Creation to the Flood. The project was very difficult. Working alone, Michelangelo had to lie on his back atop high scaffolding while he painted the vast ceiling.

## The Renaissance Spreads

The rebirth of the Italian cities attracted visitors from all over western Europe. Merchants and bankers hoped to make their fortunes in the Italian city-states. Artists and students sought knowledge and fame. When these

**The ceiling of the Sistine Chapel is one of the world's most famous paintings, but not everyone was happy with Michelangelo's work. Cardinal Biagio de Cesena noted that the crowd of more than 300 human figures would be more appropriate in a wine shop than in a papal chapel. Michelangelo responded to this criticism by adding a portrait of Biagio among the figures of the damned in the scene of the Last Judgment.**



**Pieter Bruegel's Peasant Wedding (c. 1568)**

travelers returned home, they brought Renaissance ideas with them. In time, the ideas of the Renaissance influenced people far from the Italian peninsula.

William Shakespeare is the best-known writer of the Renaissance. His plays mixed humor with drama, and showed the strengths and weaknesses of people. Audiences flocked to see his presentations of Roman emperors, British kings and queens, and Italian teenagers.

Pieter Bruegel was a Dutch painter who wanted to show people as they really were. Bruegel studied Italian art, but he developed his own style. Many of his paintings show peasants working, dancing, and eating.

## **Machiavelli**

Niccolo Machiavelli was one of the most influential writers of the Renaissance. He believed Italy could not be united unless its leader was ruthless. In 1513, he wrote *The Prince*, where he advised rulers to be kind only if it suited their purposes. Otherwise, he warned, it is better to be feared than loved.

*“You must know there are two methods of fighting, the one by law, the other by force; the first method is of men, the second of beasts; but because the first is frequently not sufficient, one must have recourse to the second. Therefore it is necessary for a prince*

*to understand how to use the methods of the beast and the man . . .*

*A prince . . . ought to choose the fox and the lion; because the lion cannot defend himself against traps and the fox cannot defend himself against wolves. Therefore, it is necessary to be a fox to discover the traps and a lion to terrify the wolves. Those who rely simply on the lion do not understand this.”*

-- Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*  
(1513)

## **Europeans Explore the World**

In the second half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, European sailors began to plan voyages that would take them beyond the limits of the world they knew. The new interest in the world came in part from the Renaissance, but the main reason was to set up new trading links with spice-producing lands in Asia.

Spices were an essential part of everyday life for the Europeans. Refrigeration had not yet been invented, so the only way to preserve meat was to salt it. Adding spices helped to hide the salty taste. The spices also concealed the taste of meat that had gone bad.

The Turks defeated the Byzantine Empire in 1453, cutting the land link between Europe and Asia. If spices were to reach Europe, a sea route to Asia had to be found. Prince Henry the Navigator of Portugal set up a school for sailors and encouraged the exploration of the African coast. In 1486, Bartholomeu Dias and his crew became the first Portuguese sailors to reach the southern tip of Africa, but he turned back because his crew was unwilling to travel any further. Ten years later, Dias helped another Portuguese sailor, Vasco da Gama, plan a voyage around Africa to India.

Christopher Columbus hoped to reach India by sailing west. When the Portuguese king would not sponsor his voyage, he asked

Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain. After six years, they agreed. When Columbus reached a group of islands across the Atlantic Ocean in 1492, he was certain he had reached his goal. Columbus called the native people Indians. This is why the Caribbean islands are known as the West Indies. Columbus made three more voyages to the Caribbean, but he never realized his mistake.

## Magellan

Aristotle first theorized that the earth was round. Columbus died believing he proved Aristotle correct, but the real confirmation came in the expedition of Ferdinand Magellan, the captain of the first ship to sail completely around the world.



**Ferdinand Magellan**

Magellan was a Portuguese sailor who explored Asia. While he was in Asia, Magellan picked up an Asian boy he called Enrique, who he brought back to Portugal. Magellan asked the King of Portugal to finance an expedition around the world. When the king rejected him, Magellan disowned his allegiance to Portugal and offered his services to Spain.

Magellan left Spain in 1519 with five ships. It took more than fourteen months to find the southern opening to the Pacific Ocean. He found it in the frigid, stormy waters now known as the Strait of Magellan. What Magellan did not count on was the immensity of the Pacific, a body of water larger than all of the land on earth. Magellan expected Asia to be a few hundred miles past beyond the coast of South America. Instead, the expedition traveled 12,600 miles before reaching land.

The starving sailors arrived the island of Guam after more than six months at sea, and then moved on to the Philippines. While in the Philippines, Magellan discovered that his servant, Enrique, could understand the native language. Magellan realized that

Enrique was the first person to have traveled completely around the world.

Magellan had survived eighteen months at sea, but he was killed in battle in the Philippines. A local warrior persuaded Magellan to defeat his rival in battle. Most of Magellan's men considered the battle both pointless and dangerous, so they refused to participate. Magellan was hit with a poison arrow in the battle and died.

One of Magellan's five ships did make it back to Spain, only twelve days less than three years after their journey started. Only one ship and eighteen sailors remained of the 265 men accompanied Magellan.