

Raphael painted this Renaissance mural, *The School of Athens*, around 1510 C.E.

# The Renaissance Begins

## 28.1 Introduction

Toward the end of the Middle Ages, a great flowering of culture called the **Renaissance** began in Italy and spread throughout Europe. In this chapter, you will learn what the Renaissance was and how it began.

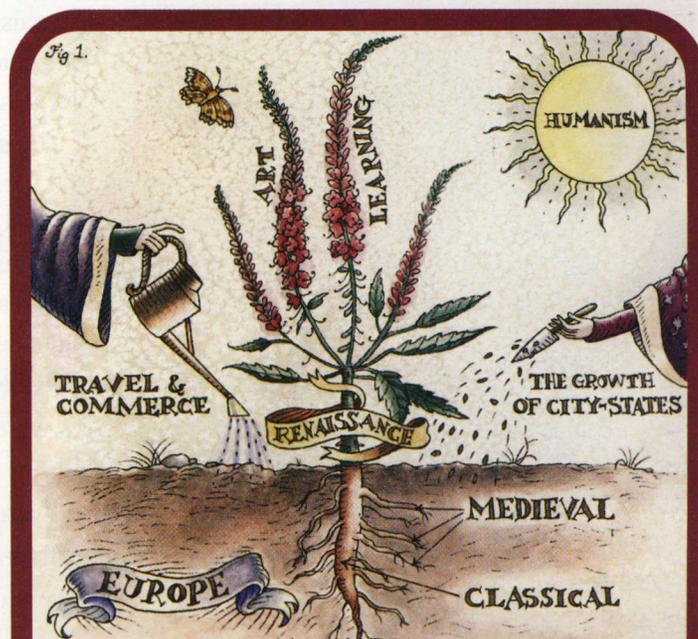
Renaissance is a French word that means “rebirth.” The Renaissance got its name from a rebirth in interest in **classical art** and **learning** that took place from the 1300s through the 1500s C.E. (*Classical* refers to the cultures of ancient Greek and Rome.) Although there was no sudden break with the Middle Ages, the Renaissance changed many aspects of people’s lives over time.

You may recall from Unit 1 that medieval European society was based on feudalism. Most people lived on feudal manors in the countryside. The Roman Catholic Church encouraged people to think more about life after death than about daily life on Earth. Except for the clergy, few people were educated.

By the Late Middle Ages, changes were occurring that helped pave the way for the Renaissance. Trade and commerce increased, and cities grew larger and wealthier. Newly wealthy merchants and bankers supported the growth of the arts and learning. A renewed interest in classical culture started a flood of new ideas. Greek and Roman examples inspired new styles of architecture, new approaches to the arts, and new ways of thinking.

Beginning in Italy, a philosophy called **humanism** developed. Humanists believed in the worth and potential of all individuals. They tried to balance religious faith with belief in the power of the human mind. Humanists took a fresh interest in human society and the natural world. This way of thinking contributed to the burst of creativity during the Renaissance.

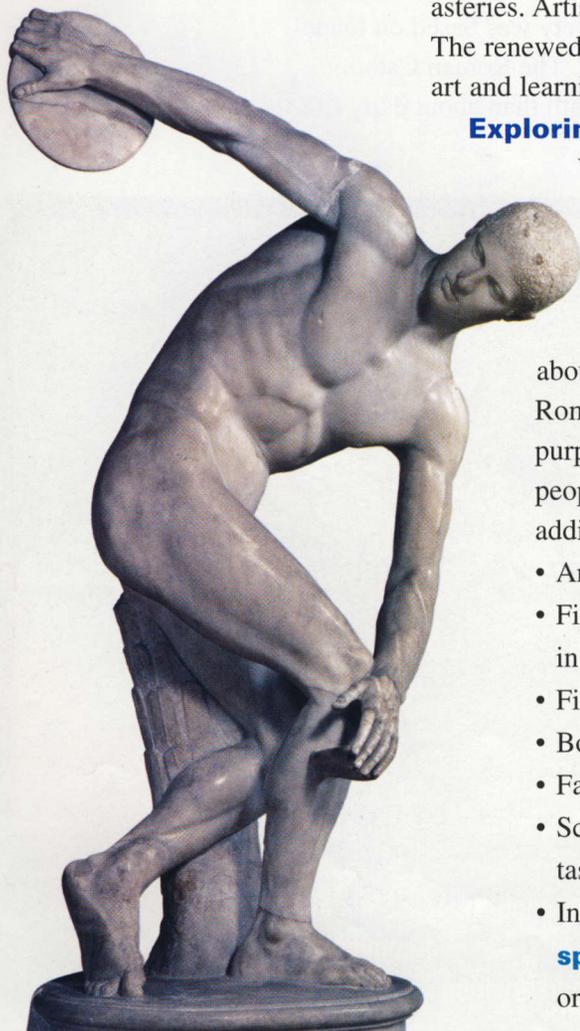
In this chapter, you’ll explore how the Renaissance differed from the Middle Ages and classical times. Then you’ll look at some changes in European life that led to the Renaissance.



Use this illustration as a graphic organizer to help you think about the Renaissance as a flowering plant that was fed by trade and commerce, the growth of city-states, and the ideas of humanism.

**perspective** the appearance of distance or depth on a flat surface, as in a painting

This example of classical art was created in 450 B.C.E. A Roman statue of a discus thrower, it celebrates the classical ideals of balance and power.



## 28.2 What Was the Renaissance?

The Renaissance began in Italy in the mid 1300s and spread to other parts of Europe in the 1400s and 1500s. Let's look more closely at this "great rebirth" of interest in classical art and learning. Then we'll use art to explore the link between the Renaissance and the classical world.

**Renewed Interest in the Classical World** The Renaissance began with the rediscovery of the classical world of ancient Greece and Rome. After the fall of Rome in the fifth century C.E., classical culture was never entirely forgotten. The Roman Catholic Church helped keep knowledge of ancient times alive by copying documents that survived from the classical period. Still, this knowledge reached relatively few people during most of the Middle Ages.

In the Late Middle Ages, merchants and crusaders brought back goods and ideas from the East, including classical learning that had been preserved in the Byzantine Empire. Europeans also read classical works that came to them by way of Muslim scholars.

This flow of ideas led to a rediscovery of Greek and Roman culture. Scholars started collecting and reading ancient manuscripts from monasteries. Artists and architects studied classical statues and buildings. The renewed interest in classical culture led to the great flowering of art and learning that we call the Renaissance.

### Exploring the Rebirth of Classical Ideas Through Art

We can trace the link between the classical world and the Renaissance by looking at art. Let's explore some of the characteristics of art from classical, medieval, and Renaissance times.

**Classical Art** The classical period lasted from about 500 B.C.E. to 500 C.E. The classical artists of Greece and Rome created sculptures, pottery, murals, and mosaics. The purpose of much of their art was to show the importance of people and leaders, as well as gods and goddesses. Here are additional characteristics of classical art:

- Artists valued balance and harmony.
- Figures were lifelike but often idealized (more perfect than in real life).
- Figures were nude or draped in togas (robes).
- Bodies looked active, and motion was believable.
- Faces were calm and without emotion.
- Scenes showed either heroic figures or real people doing tasks from daily life.
- In paintings, there was little background or sense of **perspective** (for example, showing people and objects bigger or smaller to make them look closer or farther away).

**Medieval Art** The medieval period lasted from about 500 to 1300 C.E. Medieval artists created stained glass windows, sculptures, illuminated manuscripts, paintings, and tapestries. The purpose of much medieval art was to teach religion to people who could not read or write. Here are additional characteristics of medieval art:

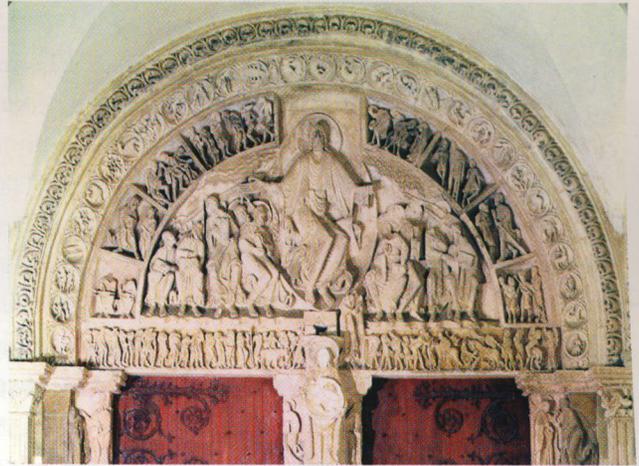
- Most art was religious, showing Jesus, saints, people from the Bible, and so on.
- Important figures in paintings were shown as larger than others around them.
- Figures looked stiff, with little sense of movement.
- Figures were fully dressed in stiff-looking clothing.
- Faces were serious and showed little feeling.
- Painted figures were two-dimensional, or flat.
- Paint colors were bright.
- Backgrounds were mostly one color, often gold.

**Renaissance Art** The Renaissance lasted from the 1300s to the early 1600s. Renaissance artists created sculptures, murals, drawings, and paintings. The aim of much Renaissance art was to show the importance of people and nature, not just religion. Here are additional characteristics of Renaissance art:

- Artists showed religious and nonreligious scenes.
- Art reflected a great interest in nature.
- Figures were lifelike and three-dimensional, reflecting an increasing knowledge of anatomy.
- Bodies looked active and were shown moving.
- Figures were either nude or clothed.
- Scenes showed real people doing everyday tasks.
- Faces expressed what people were thinking.
- Colors were shown responding to light.
- Paintings were often symmetrical (balanced, with the right and left sides having similar or identical elements).
- Full backgrounds showed perspective.

If you compare these lists, you can see that Renaissance artists were inspired more by classical art than medieval art. Like classical artists, Renaissance painters and sculptors depicted subjects that were not always religious. They tried to show people as lifelike and engaged in everyday activities. They also tried to capture the way things look in the real world.

Renaissance art reflects a rebirth of interest in the classical world. What changes brought about this revival of classical culture? Let's find out.



This example of medieval art was created for a church in France in 110 C.E. The sculpture shows Jesus sending his apostles out to preach.



This example of Renaissance art is a mural titled *The School of Athens*. It was painted by Raphael around 1510. Ancient Greek philosophers, such as Plato and Aristotle, are shown surrounded by some of the Renaissance artists they inspired centuries later.

## 28.3 The Growth of Trade and Commerce

One reason for the flowering of culture during the Renaissance was the growth of trade and commerce. Trade brought new ideas as well as goods into Europe. A bustling economy created prosperous cities and new classes of people who had the wealth to support art and learning.

Starting in the 11th century, the Crusades strengthened contacts between western Europe and Byzantine and Muslim cultures. Traders brought goods and ideas from the East that helped to reawaken interest in classical culture. In the 13th century, the Mongol conquests in Asia made it safer for traders to travel along the Silk Road to China.

The tales of the Italian traveler Marco Polo sparked even greater interest in the East. Food, art, and such luxury goods as silk and spices moved along the trade routes linking Europe to Africa and Asia.

Italian cities like Venice and Genoa were centrally located on the trade routes that linked the rest of western Europe with the East. They became bustling trading centers that attracted traders, merchants, and customers. So did cities in the north like Bruges and Brussels. Trading ships carried goods to England, Scandinavia, and present-day Russia by way of the English Channel and the Baltic and North Seas. Towns along the routes connecting southern and northern



This 15th-century French illustration shows the exchange of goods and money in a Renaissance town.

Europe, such as Cologne and Mainz in Germany, provided inns and other services for traveling merchants.

The increase in trade led to a new kind of economy. During the Middle Ages, people bartered, or traded goods for other goods. During the Renaissance, people began using coins to buy goods, creating a money economy. Coins came from many places, so moneychangers were needed to convert one type of currency into another.

As a result of all this activity, craftspeople, merchants, and bankers became more important in society. Craftspeople produced goods that merchants traded all over Europe. Bankers exchanged currency, loaned money to merchants and rulers, and financed their own businesses.

Some merchants and bankers grew very rich. With their abundant wealth, they could afford to make their cities more beautiful. Wealthy **patrons** commissioned (ordered and paid for) new buildings and art. They also helped to found (start) universities. Prosperous Renaissance cities grew into flourishing educational and cultural centers.

**patron** a person who supports the arts or other activities by supplying money for them

## 28.4 The Influence of Italian City-States

The Renaissance began in northern and central Italy. One reason it began there was the prosperity of Italian **city-states**.

In the Late Middle Ages, most of western Europe was made up of fiefs ruled by nobles. Above the nobles were monarchs. In Italy, however, growing towns demanded self-rule and developed into independent city-states. Each city-state consisted of a powerful city and the surrounding towns and countryside.

The Italian city-states conducted their own trade, collected their own taxes, and made their own laws. Some city-states, such as Florence, were **republics** that were governed by elected councils. Council members included commoners as well as nobles.

In theory, the power in republics belonged to the people. In fact, it often lay in the hands of rich merchants. During the Middle Ages, guilds of craftspeople and merchants became very powerful. During the Renaissance, groups of guild members (called *boards*) often ruled Italian city-states. Boards were supposed to change members often. However, wealthy families often gained long-term control. As a result, some city-states were ruled by a single family, like the fabulously rich Medicis in Florence.

Trade made the Italian city-states wealthy. Italy's central Mediterranean location placed its cities in the middle of the trade routes that connected distant places with the rest of western Europe. People from all over Europe came to northern Italy to buy, sell, and do their banking.

Some Italian city-states developed specializations. Florence became a center for cloth making and banking. Milan produced metal goods and armor. The port city of Genoa was a trading center for ivory and gold from northern Africa. Venice, the most powerful city-state, had hundreds of ships that controlled the trade routes in the Mediterranean Sea. Silk, spices, and perfume from Asia flowed into Venice.

The city-states' wealth encouraged a boom in art and learning. Rich families paid for the creation of statues, paintings, beautiful buildings, and elegant avenues. They built new centers of learning, such as universities and hospitals. From the city-states of Italy, Renaissance ideas spread to the rest of Europe.



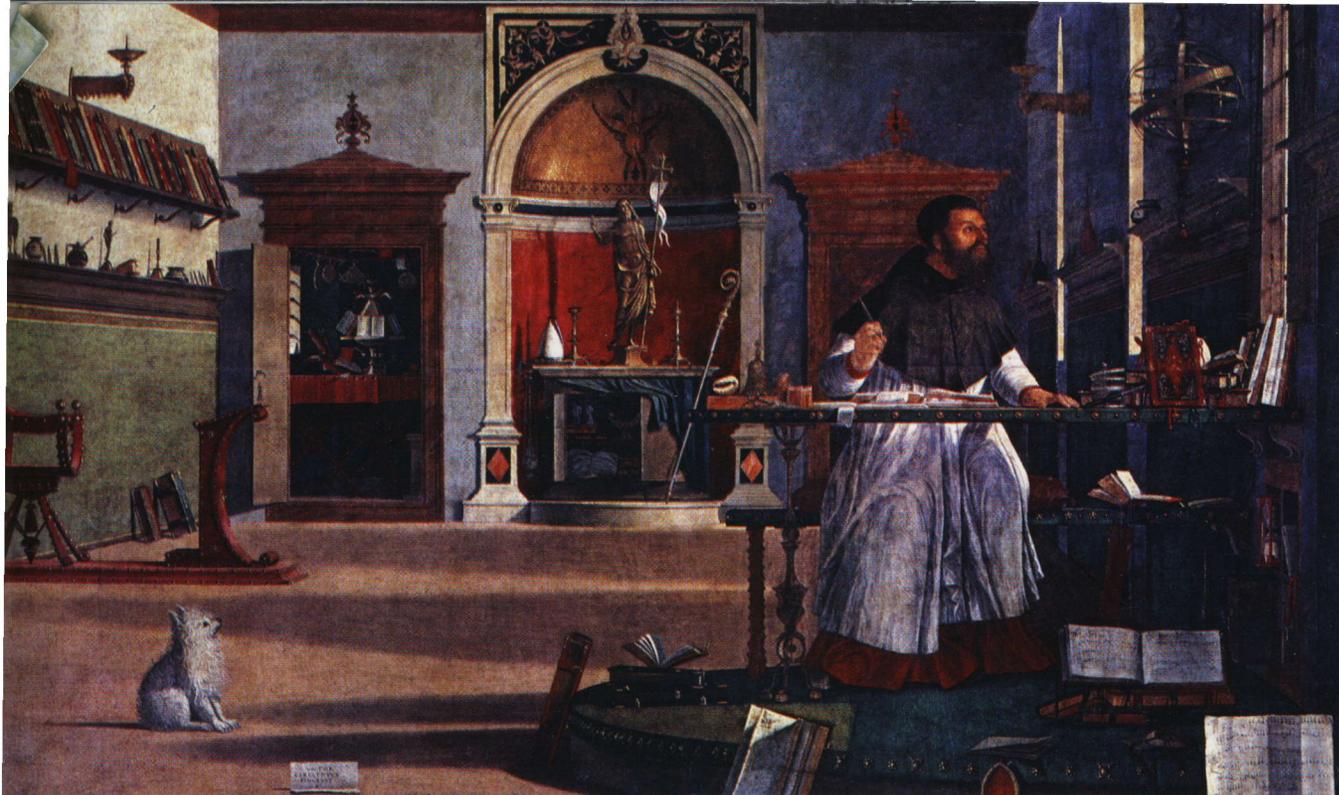
This is a late-15th-century map of Florence, one of Italy's most powerful city-states. Notice the man on a hill in the lower right corner; the artist drew himself looking over Florence.

**city-state** an independent state consisting of a city and its surrounding territory

**republic** a form of government in which people elect representatives to rule in their name

Some Italian City-States During the Renaissance





Humanist scholars in the 15th century spent time reading, studying, and writing about classical culture.

## 28.5 The Growth of Humanism

The interest in learning during the Renaissance was spurred by humanism. This way of thinking sought to balance religious faith with an emphasis on individual dignity and an interest in nature and human society.

Humanism first arose in Italy as a result of the renewed interest in classical culture. Many early humanists eagerly hunted for ancient Greek and Roman books, coins, and other artifacts that could help them learn about the classical world.

One of the first humanists was an Italian poet named Francesco Petrarch. Petrarch especially loved old books. He searched for them all over Europe and encouraged his friends to bring him any they found. Eventually, he created a large collection of ancient Latin and Greek writings, which he made available to other scholars.

Scholars from all over Europe traveled to Italy to learn about the new ideas inspired by classical culture. They studied such subjects as art, architecture, government, and language. They read classical history and poetry. They began to ask probing questions. What did classical artists find most beautiful about the human body? How did the Romans construct their buildings?

In their studies of classical culture, humanists discovered a new way of looking at life. They began to create a philosophy based on the importance and dignity of each individual. Humanists believed that all people had the ability to control their own lives and achieve greatness. In education, they stressed study of the **humanities**—a group of subjects that focused on human life and culture. These subjects included grammar, rhetoric (the study of persuasive language), history, poetry, and ethics (the study of moral values and behavior).

**humanities** areas of study that focus on human life and culture, such as history, literature, and ethics

Humanists tried to put ancient ideas into practice. Architects, for example, studied Greek and Roman ruins. Then they designed buildings with pillars, arches, and courtyards like those of classical buildings.

The humanists did not simply imitate the past. They also tried to improve on the work of the Greeks and Romans. In universities, scholars began to teach methods of observation and experimentation. Renaissance scientists proposed new ideas about stars and planets. Artists and students of medicine closely studied human anatomy. Poets wrote about religious subjects and everyday experiences such as love. Writers produced works of history and studies of politics.

The influence of classical ideals changed ideas about government. Humanists separated the state and its right to rule from the church. In doing so, they helped lay the foundation for modern thinking about politics and government.

Humanist ideals also affected people's thinking about social standing. In feudal times, people were born into a certain status in society. If someone was born a peasant, he or she would always have less status than a noble. Renaissance thinkers prized individual achievement more than a person's class or family. This emphasis on individualism was an enormous shift from medieval thinking.

The humanists' new ideas sometimes brought them into conflict with the Catholic Church. The church taught that laws were made by God and that those who broke them were sinful. It encouraged people to follow its teachings without question in order to save their souls. For the church, life after death was more important than life on Earth. In contrast, humanists believed that people should use their minds to question everything. Most tried to balance religious faith and its emphasis on the afterlife with an active interest in daily life. Some directly challenged teachings that were dear to the church. An Italian humanist, Giordano Bruno, paid for his ideas by being burned at the stake.

## 28.6 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, you explored the beginnings of the Renaissance. The Renaissance was a flowering of art and learning that was inspired by a rediscovery of classical culture. It began in Italy and spread throughout Europe.

Several factors contributed to the Renaissance. The growth of trade and commerce created prosperous cities and classes of people with the wealth to support education and the arts. Italian city-states helped spread Renaissance ideas. The new philosophy of humanism spurred interest in learning and fresh ways of thinking. In the next chapter, you will explore some of the advances that came out of the Renaissance.



Francesco Petrarca is considered the founder of Italian Renaissance humanism. A well-known poet, he wears a laurel wreath in this portrait to symbolize his crowning as poet laureate in Rome in 1341.