

The Italian Renaissance

By History.com, adapted by Newsela staff

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Toward the end of the 1300s, a handful of Italian thinkers declared that they were living in a new age. The barbarous, unenlightened "Middle Ages" were over. The new age would be a "rinascita," or rebirth, of learning and literature, art and culture. This was the birth of the period now known as the Renaissance.

For centuries, scholars agreed that the Italian Renaissance, which also means rebirth, began that simply: that between the 1300s and the 1600s, a new, modern way of thinking about the world and man's place in it replaced an old, backward one.

In fact, the Renaissance in Italy and in other parts of Europe was considerably more complicated than that. In many ways, the period we call the Renaissance was not so different from the era that preceded it. However, many of the scientific, artistic and cultural achievements of the Renaissance do share common themes – most notably the humanistic belief that man was the center of his own universe.

The Italian Renaissance in context

Italy in the 1400s was unlike any other place in Europe. It was divided into independent city-states, each with a different form of government. Florence, where the Italian Renaissance began, was an independent republic. It was also a banking and commercial capital and the third-largest city in Europe. Wealthy Florentines flaunted their money and power by becoming patrons who funded the work of artists and intellectuals. In this way, the city became the cultural center of Europe, and of the Renaissance.

The new humanism, cornerstone of the Renaissance

Thanks to the patronage of these wealthy elites, Renaissance-era writers and thinkers no longer had to work at ordinary jobs or join a monastery. Instead, they could enjoy worldly pleasures. They traveled around Italy, studying ancient ruins and rediscovering Greek and Roman texts. To Renaissance scholars and philosophers, these classical sources held great wisdom. Their nonreligious nature, their appreciation of physical beauty and especially their emphasis on man's own achievements formed the principle of the Italian Renaissance. This philosophy is known as "humanism."

Renaissance science and technology

Humanism encouraged people to be curious and to question received wisdom, particularly that of the Catholic Church. It also encouraged people to use experimentation and observation to solve earthly problems. As a result, many Renaissance intellectuals focused on trying to define and understand the laws of nature and the physical world.

For example, Renaissance artist Leonardo Da Vinci created detailed scientific studies of objects ranging from flying machines to submarines. He also carried out pioneering studies of human anatomy. The scientist and mathematician Galileo Galilei investigated one natural law after another. By dropping different-sized cannonballs from the top of a building, he proved that all objects fall at the same rate of acceleration.

Galileo also built a powerful telescope. He used it to show that Earth and other planets revolved around the sun and not, as religious authorities argued, the other way around. For this, Galileo was arrested and threatened with torture and death, but he refused to deny what he knew to be true. "I do not believe that the same God who has endowed us with senses, reason and intellect has intended us to forgo their use," he said.

Perhaps the most important technological development of the Renaissance took place in Germany. In the middle of the 1400s, Johannes Gutenberg invented the mechanical movable-type printing press. For the first time, it was possible to make books – and, by extension, knowledge – widely available.

Renaissance art and architecture

During the Italian Renaissance, art was everywhere. Patrons such as Florence's Medici family sponsored projects large and small. Successful artists became celebrities in their own right.

Renaissance artists and architects applied many humanist principles to their work. For example, the architect Filippo Brunelleschi used the elements of classical Roman architecture – shapes, columns and especially proportion – in his own buildings. He built a magnificent eight-sided dome at the Santa Maria del Fiore cathedral in Florence, which was an engineering triumph. It was 144 feet across, and weighed 37,000 tons.

Brunelleschi also devised a way to draw and paint using linear perspective. That is, he figured out how to paint from the viewpoint of the person looking at the painting. Certain straight lines were made to point toward the center of the image. For the viewer, space would appear to sink into the frame. It became one of the most noteworthy elements of almost all Renaissance painting. Later, many painters began to use a technique called *chiaroscuro*, which uses shadowing to make a painting look three-dimensional.

The end of the Italian Renaissance

By the end of the 1400s, Italy was torn apart by one war after another. The kings of England, France and Spain, along with the German territories, battled for control over it. The pope took part in these wars too, as the Catholic Church owned land and armies.

At the same time, the Catholic Church went through scandals and corruption. It had also begun a violent crackdown on those who did not agree with its teachings. In 1545, the Catholic Church officially established the Roman Inquisition. Dissenters were hunted down and prosecuted in religious courts. The Italian Renaissance was ending.