

chapter

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# ***The Renaissance, 1350–1517***



The European Renaissance began in Italy in the early 1300s and continued, spreading northward, through the late 1500s. It was by no means a complete break from the Middle Ages that preceded it. The European population was still devoutly religious, not secular, in its ways of thought and behavior. Ideas of universal equality were still a long way in the future. All human achievements were still dedicated to the glory of God (at least on the surface).

However, two important factors did make the Renaissance different from the centuries that came before. One was the rediscovery of the Classical era, the great age of Rome and to a lesser extent Greece. It was this interest in ancient literature, philosophy, science, and art that gave the Renaissance its name; the era marked a “rebirth” of Classical values and ideas.

The second factor was the questioning of Church teachings. For a thousand years, the Church had held sway over every aspect of European life and society. During the Renaissance, this began to change due to a variety of factors. The Church’s inability to stamp out the Black Plague made people begin to question its claims of unlimited power. Great scholars began to study subjects other than theology. The development of movable type made printed books widely available, and thus literacy rates rose. Cultural exchanges led to the study of ancient texts unaffected by Church tradition. This trend of questioning the Church’s accuracy and authority would eventually lead to the sixteenth-century Reformation and the eighteenth-century Enlightenment.

## CHAPTER 1 OBJECTIVES

- Define the term *Renaissance* and explain its importance in European history.
- Explain how the Church began to lose its authority during the Renaissance.
- Identify the major figures of the era and match each person to his or her accomplishments in government, politics, the arts, and/or science.

### Chapter 1 Time Line

- 1348–1350 Black Death (bubonic and pneumonic plagues) decimates European population
- 1397 Medici Bank established in Florence
- 1438 Council of Florence
- 1455 Johannes Gutenberg publishes the Vulgate Bible, the first book in Europe printed with movable type
- 1495–1498 Leonardo da Vinci paints the mural of *The Last Supper* in Milan
- 1508–1512 Michelangelo completes the frescoes on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican
- 1511 Erasmus publishes *Praise of Folly*
- 1513 Machiavelli publishes *The Prince*
- 1517 Luther publishes Ninety-Five Theses at Wittenberg

## The Renaissance

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The word *renaissance* means “rebirth.” The 250-year period of European history beginning about 1350 is called the Renaissance because it marked the rebirth of a certain way of thinking—a return to the values of the Classical era. A variety of conditions gave rise to the Renaissance. First, the Black Death decimated Europe, striking down almost half of the population. Second, survivors of the plague began migrating to the cities, causing them to grow and prosper. This

prosperity in turn meant that wealthy citizens had disposable income to spend on culture and the arts. Third, the perfection of the printing process brought about the possibility of near-universal literacy and education.

## The Renaissance in Italy

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The earliest stirrings of the ideas that would make historians label this era “the Renaissance” occurred in the Italian city-states. Several factors were responsible for this. First, Italy was the location of the Roman Empire, whose great artistic and intellectual achievements became so important to the era. It was natural that the Italians would be the first to celebrate the cultural past, which could be seen, touched, and studied literally on their very doorsteps. Second, Italy was enjoying a period of great economic prosperity. This meant that there were enormously wealthy families who had money to spend on major artistic and architectural projects. Third, the Catholic Church, which was headquartered in Rome, had begun to depend financially on wealthy Italians like Cosimo de’ Medici. This financial dependency gave these wealthy businessmen and politicians a certain amount of power over Church policies. Fourth, Italy’s location in the center of the Mediterranean, between the Middle East and the West, had always made it a place of cultural and intellectual exchange.

## The Black Death

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The Black Death is the name given to a severe epidemic of bubonic and pneumonic plague that spread across Europe from about 1348 to about 1350. The plague originated in the Crimea and was brought westward on trading ships. It was highly infectious and was spread by flea and rat bites and by close contact with the infected. Symptoms included raging fever, delirium, aching joints, vomiting, and ugly, painful swellings in the armpits and groin. Very little could be done to make a sick person comfortable, let alone cure him or her. Most of the plague’s victims died within a week of catching the disease.

Historians estimate that the Black Death killed 30 to 60 percent of Europe’s population. The loss was highest in cities, where people were crowded together in unsanitary conditions: the populations of Florence, Paris, and London were cut in half. The death rate was comparatively lower in isolated rural areas, where there was less chance of infection.

Naturally, this was a time of terror throughout Europe. Medical science was at a primitive stage, and no one understood where the disease had come from or what caused it. Many people believed it was a sign that the world was coming to an end. People turned to the Church for help, as it was the universal authority of the time. However, the Church could do nothing to combat the epidemic. Priests who cared for the sick caught the plague and died like anyone else.

The Black Death helped to bring about the Renaissance in a number of ways. First, survivors began moving to cities looking for work as the disease receded. Cities grew larger as a result. Second, so many workers and artisans had died that those who were left found that their services were in greater demand. Third, people began to doubt that the Church was as omnipotent as it had always claimed to be. If it was so helpless in the face of real disaster, what power did the Church really have?

## The Church in the Renaissance

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For a thousand years before the Renaissance, the Roman Catholic Church had held universal, undisputed sway over all aspects of life in Western Europe. This began to change during the Renaissance for a number of reasons.

First, the Church proved powerless in the face of the Black Death. This shook the faith of the ordinary people. Second, secular authorities such as the powerful merchant families of Italy arose; they proved powerful rivals to the Church's authority. Third, the Church itself encouraged and eased the cultural exchange that led to such developments as the study of Greek and Middle Eastern texts and ideas. Fourth, the Church embraced the Classical revival that played a part in undermining its own authority. Fifth, the availability of printed books in Europe after 1450 meant that more people were reading and learning to think for themselves.

Beginning in 1414, the Church sponsored a series of councils—international gatherings of scholars and church officials. The goal of the councils was to repair a schism in the Church that had led to rival papacies throughout much of the fourteenth century, one in Avignon and one in Rome. Once the Church was reunited under one pope, the next goal was to reunite the Roman and Eastern Orthodox churches, which had been split since the year 1054. This was the purpose of the Council of Florence, convened in 1438. It was sponsored in part by money from the Medici family.

Scholars and officials from Greece, Ethiopia, Russia, Cairo, and Trebizond came to Florence for the council. It thus became an unprecedented exchange of ideas from the various cultures. Eastern and Western scholars were able to trade books and manuscripts and hold long debates and discussions on questions of science and philosophy. While the Eastern guests admired new Italian works of art and architecture, Western scholars pored over texts by Euclid, Plato, and Aristotle—works to which they had never before had access.

The council not only failed to reunite the Roman and Orthodox Churches, but, ironically, by making the spread and exchange of knowledge possible, it weakened the authority of the Church. As knowledge continued to spread and literacy continued to rise, people questioned the Church more and more. Only another eighty years would go by before Martin Luther began the Protestant Reformation that would change everything.

## Politics and the Economy

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In the days of the Black Death, Italy was not a unified nation. It was a collection of politically independent city-states whose people shared a common ethnic, cultural, religious, and linguistic heritage. These city-states were ruled by wealthy middle-class families who seized and clung to political power because this was the best way to further their business interests.

Florence was especially important in the Renaissance because its economy recovered quickly from the Black Death and the city enjoyed a period of great prosperity. The Medici family ruled the city of Florence for most of the 1400s. This stupendously wealthy family of bankers and importers used and invested its money in two areas. The first was patronage of the arts; the Medicis sponsored many of the most significant artistic achievements of the period. The second was financial loans to the Church. By being the Church's banker, the Medici family gained a significant amount of influence over Church policies. Strong family ties to the papacy gave the Medicis virtual control of Rome as well as Florence. In the 1480s, a Medici married the son of Pope Innocent VIII. In 1513, Giovanni de' Medici became Pope Leo X.

This table shows the most prominent members of the Medici family and their major achievements.

## THE MEDICI FAMILY

Name	Political Achievements	Contributions to the Arts and Letters
Cosimo de' Medici (1389–1464)	Sponsorship of the Council of Florence in 1438	Built up family library into one of the largest and most important in Europe
Lorenzo de' Medici (Lorenzo the Magnificent) (1449–1492)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organized army against Turkish Invasion in 1480</li> <li>• Arranged marriage between his daughter and son of Pope Innocent VIII</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Founded academy for artists in Florence</li> <li>• Patron of Michelangelo</li> <li>• Accomplished poet</li> <li>• Continued to add to family library</li> </ul>
Giovanni de' Medici (Pope Leo X) (1475–1521)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• By 1512, had returned Medici family to power lost in 1494</li> <li>• Became Pope Leo X in 1513</li> <li>• United central Italian states politically</li> </ul>	Ordered and oversaw reconstruction and restoration of the Vatican and St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, including major contributions by Michelangelo, Bramante, and Raphael

The political insights of Niccolò Machiavelli, born in Florence in 1469, remain highly influential even today. Machiavelli's most famous work is a short discourse titled *The Prince*, published in 1513. In an obvious bid for employment, Machiavelli dedicated *The Prince* to Giuliano de' Medici. It is a treatise explaining how to gain and hold absolute political power. What made the book so revolutionary was its frank assertion that a prince should not hesitate to act treacherously or dishonestly in order to keep his power. He should not be swayed by considerations of ethics or religion. Machiavelli's realistic approach to politics is as relevant today as it was in his own time.

## Michelangelo

Born in Florence in 1475, Michelangelo Buonarroti is one of the towering figures of art. He achieved great fame in his own lifetime and forever after as a sculptor, architect, painter, and poet. During his career, Michelangelo received many important commissions from members of the Medici family.

The frescoes that Pope Leo X commissioned for the ceiling of the Vatican's Sistine Chapel constitute Michelangelo's greatest claim to fame. Michelangelo eschewed the usual practice of the time, in which the master artist would design the overall plan but have assistants help him on the actual painting. Instead, Michelangelo himself painted the entire ceiling (a surface of more than ten thousand square feet) over a four-year period from 1508 to 1512. He planned an ambitious, daring scheme of Old Testament scenes framed and surrounded by painted architectural elements and Classical figures.

From the historian's point of view, the Sistine Chapel ceiling is most notable for its mix of biblical and Classical elements. Michelangelo set aside twelve large, prominent spaces for portraits of ancient prophets of the birth of Jesus. Seven male prophets from the Old Testament alternate with the figures of five female pagan sibyls—prophets from the Classical world. Michelangelo treated these figures equally in terms of placement, size, and scale, with no suggestion that either the artist or the patron saw any incongruity. Given that the Sistine Chapel was at the very heart of the headquarters of the Catholic Church, and that the Church itself sponsored the project, this alone makes it clear that Renaissance Europeans had no sense that these elements were contradictory.

The ceiling frescoes show a clear break with medieval artistic traditions in their style as well. The figures are heroic in size and scale, bursting out of frames that cannot contain them. They are shown in a great variety of poses, from every angle and point of view—a complete break from the medieval style. These figures also show that Michelangelo had a thorough knowledge of human anatomy; the depiction of the bones and muscles beneath the skin is perfectly accurate. The faces reveal recognizable emotions that make the frescoes a celebration of the human being. All these elements mark the Sistine ceiling as a product of the Renaissance. Sixteenth-century art historian Giorgio Vasari later wrote that the Sistine ceiling “restored light to a world that for centuries had been plunged into darkness.”

## The Perfection of Printing

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Woodblock printing was invented in China before A.D. 220 and remained the main method of printing on cloth and paper for centuries. However, this method was not practical for printing multiple copies of long texts. Movable type, in which each block was an individual letter or character, made the pro-

cess much more efficient. Printers first tried movable wooden type, but soon turned to metal because it was much more durable.

The Koreans were the first to print entire books with movable metal type, perhaps as early as the 1200s. The world's oldest surviving book printed with movable metal type is a Korean guide to Buddhism published in the late 1300s.

Like all other Asian inventions, the technology of printing eventually traveled westward. Europeans were producing printed textiles and fabrics by the twelfth century. When paper became widely available around 1400, they began trying to develop an efficient method of printing texts on it. Born around 1398 in the city of Mainz, the artisan Johannes Gutenberg achieved the first and best success at movable-type printing in Europe. He invented the modern printing press and also arrived at a combination of metals that made his type the clearest and most durable. In fact, his recipe continued to be used until digital printing became near-universal at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

The first European printed book was the Vulgate Bible, the Latin translation commonly used throughout Europe at that time. It is often called “the Gutenberg Bible” in honor of the printer.

The importance of the development of movable type and the printing press cannot be underestimated. Printing may be the single most important invention of the millennium. The widespread availability of books led directly and swiftly to a rise in literacy. For the first time, literacy and knowledge were not exclusive to priests and wealthy people, but came within the reach of everyone. For the first time, texts (including the Bible) became available in the languages people actually spoke, not just in Latin.

## Humanism

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The word *humanism* refers to a Classical course of study at European universities, many of which were founded between about A.D. 1000 and 1200. Humanism meant the study of the seven liberal arts, “liberal” because in ancient Rome this was regarded as the proper course of study for a free man (in Latin, *liberus* means “free”). The liberal arts consisted of grammar, logic, rhetoric, arithmetic, music, geometry, and astronomy.

The humanist course of study focused on Classical texts, from both the Greek and Roman eras. Roman texts predominated for two reasons. First, they were written in Latin, which was much easier for Europeans to understand than Greek. All the Romance languages of Western Europe, especially Italian,



were closely based on Latin, and Latin had been kept alive by constant use in the Church. Second, Italy was the seat of the Roman Empire; the Roman manuscripts and scrolls were physically handy, relatively easy to obtain and copy for study purposes. Only time, travel, and cultural exchange would eventually bring the Greek manuscripts west for study.

Humanist scholars of the Renaissance focused their interest on the human being as a unique individual, with his or her own way of thinking about the great questions of philosophy and the meaning of life. All of this, however, was firmly in the context of the human being as God's creation, with all human achievement being dedicated to God's glory. In this era, the word *humanism* did not have the secular connotation it has in our own time.

Desiderus Erasmus, born in Rotterdam in 1466, is probably the best known of the Humanists. Erasmus' work shows that he embraced both biblical and Classical studies. He published a Latin translation of the Greek New Testament in 1516, but also completed translations and scholarly commentaries on Classical texts, including the works of Plutarch and Seneca. He corresponded with most of the great European scholars of his day and was widely regarded as the hub of the intellectual world.

## QUIZ

- 1. The word *Renaissance* refers to**
  - A. the reawakening of interest in Classical values and ideas.
  - B. the gradual loss of authority of the Catholic Church.
  - C. the loss of half of Europe's population during the Black Death.
  - D. the role wealthy merchants played in the development of art.
- 2. \_\_\_\_\_ is an important historical figure because he perfected the process of printing books with movable type.**
  - A. Michelangelo Buonarroti
  - B. Cosimo de' Medici
  - C. Martin Luther
  - D. Johannes Gutenberg

3. **One important reason Italy was the birthplace of the European Renaissance was**
  - A. its geographical status as the center of the Roman Empire.
  - B. the greatness of its writers, scholars, and artists.
  - C. its strong political unity as a nation.
  - D. the economic depression that followed the Black Death.
  
4. **Western scholars of the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries primarily studied Roman texts instead of Greek ones because**
  - A. Greek texts were not as well written as Roman.
  - B. Greek texts were scarcer and harder to understand than Roman.
  - C. Greek texts were older than Roman.
  - D. Greek texts showed a different way of thinking than Roman.
  
5. **The Black Death was one powerful factor that caused ordinary Europeans to question the omnipotence of**
  - A. humanism.
  - B. medical science.
  - C. the Church.
  - D. the economy.
  
6. \_\_\_\_\_ **excelled as a sculptor, painter, architect, and poet.**
  - A. Michelangelo Buonarroti
  - B. Lorenzo de' Medici
  - C. Desiderus Erasmus
  - D. Martin Luther
  
7. **Pope Leo X commissioned \_\_\_\_\_**
  - A. the restoration of the Vatican and St. Peter's Basilica.
  - B. the printing of the Vulgate edition of the Bible.
  - C. the Council of Florence.
  - D. the founding of the Medici Bank.
  
8. **The Medici family ruled \_\_\_\_\_ for most of the fifteenth century.**
  - A. Rome
  - B. Florence
  - C. Italy
  - D. France

9. \_\_\_\_\_ wrote a political treatise stating that princes should not hesitate to commit unethical acts in order to hold on to their power.
- A. Michelangelo Buonarroti
  - B. Johannes Gutenberg
  - C. Desiderus Erasmus
  - D. Niccolò Machiavelli
10. The most important effect of the Council of Florence was
- A. the official reunion of the Roman and Orthodox Catholic Churches.
  - B. a major exchange of books and ideas among Eastern and Western scholars.
  - C. Pope Leo X's decision to restore the Vatican and St. Peter's Basilica.
  - D. the publication of the first Bible printed with movable type.