

# Chapter 2 : The Italian Renaissance

*The term “renaissance” (“rebirth” in French) was introduced by Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574), an Italian art historian who wrote of the rebirth (rinascità) of art in Italy during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The concept of the Renaissance was then applied more broadly to describe a dramatic rebirth of civilization in Western Europe. This view of the Renaissance involves two erroneous concepts. First, there is the idea that the Middle Ages had few cultural accomplishments to their credit. Second, there is the idea that, sometime around 1350, a sudden rebirth of literature, art, and scholarship began in Italy.*

These views overlook the accomplishments of medieval European civilization, especially those of the High Middle Ages from about 1000 to 1300. During this period, Romanesque and Gothic architecture emerged, the first universities were established, and scholastic philosophy developed.

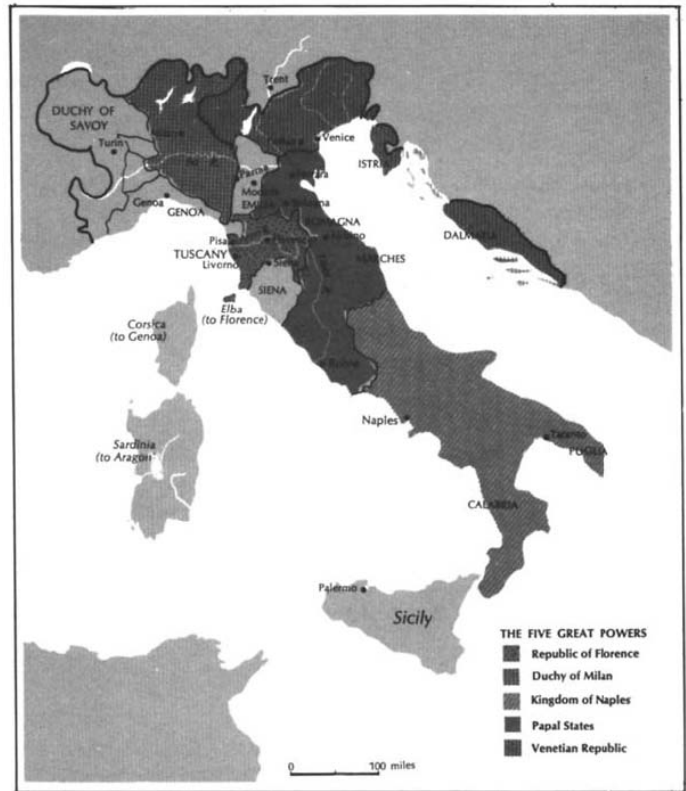
What occurred in Italy beginning in the fourteenth century was not, therefore, a sudden rebirth but rather a continuation of what had been underway for several centuries, although there were some significant shifts in emphases. Above all, the Italian Renaissance involved an intensification of interest in the classical civilizations of ancient Greece and Rome, especially in classical literature, thought, art, and architecture. In addition, the Italian Renaissance brought an intensification of the secular spirit in Western European civilization. This meant an increasing concern with the things of this world rather than with eternity and a new emphasis on the individual and individual accomplishment .

## The Italian States

### Urban Civilization

The civilization of the Italian Renaissance was urban, centered on towns that had become prosperous from manufacturing, trade, and banking. Italians had acquired considerable wealth, and some of this wealth was used to support writers, scholars, and artists.

During the Renaissance, Italy remained divided politically. In northern Italy, the city-states of Florence, Milan, and Venice became major centers of Renaissance civilization. Rome dominated the Papal States of central Italy, while the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies embraced most of southern Italy.



Italy, 1454

## Florence

During the fourteenth century, Florence emerged as a major center of handicraft industry, specializing in textiles, especially woollens. In addition, Florence became an important banking center. An independent republic, Florence was ruled by a small oligarchy.

### The Medici

During most of the fifteenth century, the Medici family dominated Florence. The Medici had extensive interests in industry, trade, and especially banking. The first of the Medici to gain an influential role in the politics of the city was Giovanni di Bicci de' Medici (1360-1429). Then, from 1434 until his death, Cosimo de' Medici (1389-1464), Giovanni's son, ruled the city. Cosimo was succeeded by his son Piero (1416-1469), but the most famous of the Medici was Lorenzo the Magnificent (1449-1492), Cosimo's grandson, who ruled Florence from 1469 until his death.

### Decline of Florence

In 1494, Savonarola (1452-1498), a Franciscan friar, gained power in Florence, exercising a strict and puritanical rule over the city. In 1498, the Florentines overthrew the dictator, and Savonarola was burned at the

stake. After Savonarola's death, the Medici returned to power, but the great age of Florence had passed.

## Milan

Located in northern Italy, the duchy of Milan was an important center of the overland trade between Italy's seaports, especially Venice, and Northern Europe, on the other side of the Alps. Milan also gained wealth from agriculture and industry, especially the production of silk and armor.

### *The Visconti*

From 1227 to 1447, members of the Visconti family ruled Milan. In particular, Gian Galeazzo Visconti (c. 1351-1402), who became Milan's ruler in 1378, furthered the city's development as a commercial center.

### *The Sforzas*

Following the death of the last of the Visconti, Milan was briefly a republic, from 1447 to 1450. In the latter year, Francesco Sforza (1401-1466), the son-in-law of the last Visconti ruler, became duke and established himself as Milan's despotic ruler. Sforza was the son of a *condottiere*, a professional soldier of fortune who commanded mercenaries. Ludovico (1479-1508) was the most famous of the Sforzas. Known as Ludovico il Moro (Ludovico the Moor), he dominated Milan from 1480 to 1499. Like Francesco, he was an enthusiastic patron of the arts.

### *Decline of Milan*

In the early sixteenth century, Milan experienced a substantial political and economic decline. The city became part of the Spanish empire in 1535.

## Venice

The great commercial city of Venice was reputed to have one of the most effective governments in Europe.

### *Government*

Venice was an oligarchy. Political power was the exclusive preserve of the male descendants of the wealthy merchants who had served as the councillors of the city-state prior to 1297 and whose names were inscribed in the Golden Book. The oligarchy comprised the Great Council, which elected the doge (duke), the chief executive of Venice, for a lifetime term. In practice, the doge was largely a figurehead ruler, subject to the control of the inner circle of the oligarchy who comprised the Council of Ten.

### *Trade*

Located at the northern end of the Adriatic Sea, the prosperity of Venice was based on trade, particularly with

the largely Moslem-controlled lands at the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea. By the fifteenth century, Venice held a near-monopoly on the sale of spices and luxury goods from the East to the rest of Europe.

## The Renaissance Popes in Rome

The Great Schism (see Chapter 1) ended with the election of Pope Martin V (r. 1417-1431). He and his immediate successor, Pope Eugenius IV (r. 1431-1447) reestablished papal control over Rome and the Papal States of central Italy.

As the fifteenth century progressed, the popes became increasingly involved in secular affairs and Renaissance culture, actively promoting learning and the arts. However, the secular involvements of the Renaissance popes reduced their effectiveness and undermined their prestige as the administrative and spiritual leaders of the Roman Catholic Church in Western Europe.

### *Nicholas V*

Pope Nicholas V (r. 1447-1455) had previously served the Medici family of Florence as a librarian. As pope, he established the Vatican Library with its original collection of 1,200 volumes.

### *Pius II*

Pope Pius II (r. 1458-1464) had earlier achieved note as a humanist scholar under the latinized name of Aeneas Silvius. He devoted himself to efforts to preserve ancient Roman structures that had fallen into ruin.

### *Sixtus IV*

Pope Sixtus IV (r. 1471-1484) became active in the tumultuous politics of Renaissance Italy, hoping both to make the Papal States more powerful and to advance his family's political fortunes. His interest in cultural affairs led him to expand the Vatican Library.

### *Alexander VI*

Pope Alexander VI (r. 1492-1503), a member of the Spanish Borgia family, also sought to promote the interests of his family. He spent large sums to support the army of his son Cesare Borgia (c. 1476-1507), who was trying to create a family domain in central Italy.

### *Julius II*

Pope Julius II (r. 1503-1513), the nephew of Sixtus IV, became known as the Warrior Pope. He personally led the papal armies into battle against both the French and the Venetians.

### *Leo X*

Pope Leo X (r. 1513-1521), a Medici, used papal money to help his family in the domestic and external struggles of Florence. He was pope at the beginning of Martin Luther's Reformation (see Chapter 4).

## The Kingdom of the Two Sicilies

Until the early fifteenth century, the French House of Anjou ruled Naples, while Sicily was controlled by the Spanish Kingdom of Aragon.

In 1442, Aragon acquired Naples. The combination of Sicily and Naples became known as the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. The new kingdom included about half of the Italian peninsula, but it never became powerful enough to threaten the independence of the other Italian states.

## Literature

### The Tuscan Triumvirate

During the Italian Renaissance, serious literary works began to be written in Italian, the vernacular language, instead of Latin. The first three major writers – Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio – of the Italian Renaissance are known as the Tuscan Triumvirate because of their association with Florence, the major city of the region of Tuscany. Their work helped make the Tuscan dialect the standard form of the Italian language.

#### Dante

Dante Alighieri (1265-1321) was in many ways a writer of the Middle Ages, but he can also be regarded as the first author of the Italian Renaissance. He is best known for the *Divine Comedy*, an epic poem written in Italian. Divided into three parts, the *Divine Comedy* tells of Dante's journey through Inferno (hell), Purgatory, and Paradise (heaven). The Latin poet Virgil serves as Dante's guide through Inferno and Purgatory, while Beatrice, Dante's idealized woman, is his guide through Paradise. Virgil represents reason and the values of classical civilization, while Beatrice represents love, faith, and divine revelation.

#### Petrarch

Francesco Petrarca, known as Petrarch (1304-1374), is renowned for his love lyrics, in the form of sonnets, addressed to Laura. Petrarch developed the Italian sonnet, a poem of fourteen lines, divided into a group of eight and a group of six, with each group having its own rhyme scheme.

Petrarch became an important figure in the movement of literary humanism, which involved the search for long-lost or forgotten Latin manuscripts, and the effort to write in

Latin in imitation of the ancient authors. Petrarch's original work in Italian was of greater literary merit than his imitative writings in Latin, however.

#### Boccaccio

Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375) is best known for his *Decameron* (1348-1353), a collection of witty and often bawdy tales told over a period of ten days by a group of ten young people fleeing Florence at the time of the Black Death in 1348. Petrarch interested him in the search for ancient manuscripts, and Boccaccio learned Greek, which Petrarch had not done.

## Other Renaissance Writers

#### Machiavelli

Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527) was the most important writer on politics to emerge during the Italian Renaissance. In *The Prince* (1513), Machiavelli rejected the traditional Christian view that the state is subject to divine law. Instead, he adopted a totally secular and amoral view of politics. In Machiavelli's view, the state existed for its own sake. The ruler should be concerned, above all, with the preservation of his authority. Toward that end, the ruler was justified in using any means.

#### Castiglione

Baldassare Castiglione (1478-1529), a humanist and papal diplomat, wrote *The Book of the Courtier* (1518), in which he presented rules of gentlemanly behavior. He believed a gentleman should know both Greek and Latin and should have a fluent writing style in both the classical languages and the vernacular. Castiglione was an important advocate of a humanistic education that emphasized the study of classical languages and literature.

#### Cellini

Benvenuto Cellini (1500-1571) was both a famed goldsmith and silversmith and an important writer. An unabashed egotist, he wrote a revealing *Autobiography* (1558-1562), characterized by a remarkable frankness about his sexual and other exploits.

#### Valla

Lorenzo Valla (c. 1405-1457) was an important Renaissance scholar. He applied the methods of linguistic and historical analysis to demonstrate that the Donation of Constantine, a document supposedly written in the fourth century, was in fact an eighth-century forgery. According to this document, the Roman Emperor Constantine had given to Pope Sylvester I the right to rule over central Italy.

In reality, the pope's claim to central Italy was based on the Donation of Pepin, an eighth-century Frankish king.

## Art and Architecture

### Giotto

Giotto (c. 1266-1337), a contemporary of Dante, is often regarded as the first artist of the Italian Renaissance. He was trained in the Byzantine style, which had dominated medieval Italian art. In this style, the subjects, usually Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and the saints, were portrayed in a highly stylized manner against solid backgrounds, often gold or black. Giotto departed significantly from this formula. While his work remained religious, he portrayed his subjects in a more truly human fashion and placed them in realistic settings, often landscapes. He also experimented with light and shade (*chiaroscuro*) in his paintings, which helped provide an illusion of depth. Giotto is most famous for his frescoes, including a series on the life of St. Francis of Assisi for the Basilica of St. Francis in Assisi. He also painted a noted series of frescoes in the Arena Chapel (begun c. 1304) in Padua. As the official architect of Florence during the last years of his life, Giotto designed the campanile (bell tower) of the city's cathedral.

### Masaccio

For about a century after Giotto, there were few innovations in Italian art. Then, in the early fifteenth century, Masaccio (1401-c. 1428), a Florentine painter, effectively used light and shade to create a greater sense of perspective. He demonstrated his mastery of perspective with especially dramatic effect in the painting of *The Holy Trinity* (1425), a fresco in the Dominican church of Santa Maria Novella in Florence. Masaccio's work had a powerful influence on other artists of the Italian Renaissance.

### Sandro Botticelli

Sandro Botticelli (1444-1510), a Florentine painter, is known for his graceful paintings marked by a use of vivid colors. Many of his best-known works were inspired by themes drawn from classical mythology. Among them are *The Birth of Venus* (c. 1480) and *Primavera*, an allegory representing the coming of spring. Botticelli also painted religious subject matter, including *The Adoration of the Magi*.

### Leonardo da Vinci

A native of Florence (1452-1519), Leonardo worked for many years in Milan and also spent several years in Rome. In his later life, he went to France to work for King Francis I and died there.

### Paintings

Leonardo was the first Italian artist to use oil paints, which had been developed in Flanders (see Chapter 3). Among Leonardo's best-known paintings are the *Mona Lisa* (c. 1502), a haunting portrait of an Italian noblewoman, and a fresco of *The Last Supper* (c. 1495-1498), painted in the refectory of a Dominican friary in Milan. In *The Last Supper*, Leonardo portrayed the dramatic moment when Jesus told his apostles that one of them would betray him. Leonardo experimented with light and shadow in another famous painting, *The Virgin of the Rocks* (c. 1485). Like most Renaissance artists, Leonardo's work was mainly religious, but he dealt with this religious subject matter in a secular and humanized fashion.

### Scientific Interests

Leonardo had very broad interests, including an intense interest in scientific subjects. His notebooks, filling more than 5000 pages, reveal that he was influenced by many sources, including classical authors, but Leonardo added his own bold imagination to what he learned from others. Studying fossils, he reached conclusions that were later confirmed by geologists. He acquired a considerable knowledge of anatomy by performing dissections. He prepared accurate drawings of most of the muscles of the human body, as well as sketches of the nerves and blood vessels. In addition, he provided the first accurate description of the human skeleton. Leonardo sketched all sorts of possibilities, including pumps and lathes, a diving helmet, a submarine, a parachute, an airplane, and a machine gun. For the most part, Leonardo's ideas remained on paper. Little was known about them during his lifetime. Following his death, most of his notebooks were dispersed, and few of his sketches were published prior to the nineteenth century.

### Raphael

During his short but highly productive life, Raphael Santi (1483-1520) worked mainly in Florence and Rome. He is particularly well-known for his Madonnas, humanized portrayals of the Virgin Mary with the baby Jesus. One of the most famous is the brooding *Sistine Madonna*. Raphael also painted a series of frescoes on the walls of a number of rooms in the Vatican Palace, which became

known as the Raphael Rooms (completed in 1511). Among these famous frescoes are *The School of Athens* and *The Triumph of Religion*, which reflect the artist's strong interest both in classical antiquity and the Christian religion. Raphael also painted a number of noteworthy portraits.

### **Michelangelo**

Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1564) worked mainly in Florence and Rome. While he was a painter of great accomplishment, he believed himself to be primarily a sculptor.

As a young man, Michelangelo painted a series of frescoes on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican (1508-1512). Over a period of four years, he painted nine scenes from the Old Testament dealing with the period from the Creation to the Flood. Later, he returned to the Sistine Chapel to paint his powerful *Last Judgment* (1534-1541) on the wall behind the altar.

As a sculptor, Michelangelo is famed for a number of works, including a nude statue of the Biblical king *David* (1501-1504) and a powerful portrayal of *Moses* (c. 1513-1515). This statue was intended to be a part of the tomb of Pope Julius II, which was never completed.

Michelangelo also sculpted several *pietàs* (statues of Mary holding the body of the dead Jesus). The most famous *Pietà*, done when the sculptor was still in his twenties, is located in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome.

### **Sculpture**

In addition to Michelangelo, the Italian Renaissance produced several noted sculptors.

### **Ghiberti**

Lorenzo Ghiberti (1378-1455) is known for the bronze doors of the baptistery in Florence, depicting Old Testament scenes. This work made a powerful impression on Michelangelo, who described the doors as worthy of being the gates of paradise.

### **Donatello**

Donatello (c. 1386-1466), a Florentine, studied classical sculpture. One of his best-known works is a bronze statue of David (c. 1430-1432), the first free-standing nude in European art since Roman times. Donatello also did a large bronze equestrian statue of the Venetian *condottiere* Gattamelata (1445-1450), which stands in a square in Padua. This was the first equestrian statue by a Western European artist since Roman times.

### **Architecture**

Italian Renaissance architects revived the style of the ancient Romans, using columns, rounded arches, and domes.

### **Brunelleschi**

Filippo Brunelleschi (1377-1446), the first major architect of the Italian Renaissance, designed several churches in Florence, including Santo Spirito and San Lorenzo, as well as the city's Pitti Palace. He is most famous, however, for the octagonal dome of the cathedral of Florence (begun in 1420).

### **Bramante**

Donato Bramante (1444-1514) worked for Pope Julius II, who gave him the task of rebuilding St. Peter's basilica. After Bramante's death, both Raphael and Michelangelo served for a time as architects of St. Peter's. While Michelangelo designed the dome of the new basilica, he did not live to see it completed.

## **The Later Renaissance: Venice**

The Renaissance reached its height in Venice somewhat later than elsewhere in Italy. Since the city's damp climate quickly damaged frescoes, Venetian artists painted most frequently on canvas. They also usually worked with oil paints and are known for the richness of their colors.

### **The Bellini Brothers**

The Bellini brothers, Gentile (1429-1507) and Giovanni (c. 1430-1516), were members of an illustrious family of painters. Giovanni Bellini's best-known paintings include *The Agony in the Garden* and *St. Francis in Ecstasy* (c. 1485), as well as a number of portraits.

### **Giorgione**

Giorgione (c. 1478-1510) was a pupil of Giovanni Bellini. One of his most famous paintings is the *Tempesta* (c. 1505), a mysterious portrayal of a seminude woman in a stormy landscape.

### **Tintoretto**

Tintoretto (1518-1594) was the nickname of Jacopo Robusti. The nickname means "little dyer," which was his father's trade. Among his major works are *The Miracle of St. Mark* (1548), devoted to the patron saint of Venice, and *Christ Before Pilate* (1566-1567).

### **Titian**

Tiziano Vecellio, known as Titian (1477-1576), is the most famous of the Venetian painters of the Renaissance. He was extremely prolific, producing an average of one painting a month during his long career. Even among

Venetian artists, Titian stands out for the richness of his colors, especially purple and above all, red. He did many religious paintings, including the great altarpiece of *The Assumption of the Virgin* (completed in 1518) in the Church of Santa Maria dei Frari in Venice, and works featuring the elaborate ceremonies of the church. In addition, he painted portraits of many of the great figures of the age, among them King Francis I of France, the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, and King Philip II of Spain.

### **Palladio**

Like other Renaissance architects, the Venetian architect Andrea Palladio (1508-1580) was influenced by the Roman style. He designed several churches and palaces in Venice, as well as a number of villas in the nearby countryside. The influence of Palladio can be seen in eighteenth-century Georgian architecture both in England and America.

*The Italian Renaissance had a powerful impact on the civilization of Western Europe. The renewed emphasis on classical languages and literature influenced the development of European education over the next several centuries, while the revival of classical ideals in painting, sculpture, and architecture had an enduring influence on Western art.*

*In time, the achievements of the Italian Renaissance gradually spread beyond Italy, helping to produce a Renaissance in several other countries.*