

Culture of the Renaissance

September 6, 2009

When people think of the Renaissance they usually think of Michelangelo and the Sistine Chapel, Leonardo da Vinci and his Mona Lisa, and Florence. It was not only a cultural movement associated with the arts, but also associated with the study of ancient Greek and Latin works. However, it was not above all a literary movement as the author, Frankforter, suggests. Although the scholars of the age did search out old and forgotten works, the artists, sculptors and architects of the age also looked back to old works of art. They invented new techniques and new ways of representing old ideas and classical works, as well as creating new ones.

According to the author the Humanists were the intellectual leaders of the Renaissance. During the Renaissance people were focused on the individual and life. The Renaissance was full of new ideas. People were able to break away from the church with the invention of the printing press and the translation of major works, particularly the translation of the Bible, into the vernacular. The printing press allowed for greater access to literature and understanding of the Bible. The Renaissance was very tolerable of religion, and a break from the traditional form of the church did not mean that people separated themselves from religious teachings and ideas. In fact, during the Renaissance there was a large number of religious paintings and sculptures. The humanists also valued a normal life and thought that people should get married, have families, and focus on life and enjoy its pleasures.

During a time of renewal of ancient works and innovation of new ideas, the Renaissance became a time in which poets, writers, artists, sculptors, and architects were widely recognized and valued as important contributors to society. In earlier years this had not been the case. It seemed as if people did not appreciate literature as they did in the Renaissance. One reason may have been that before the Renaissance many books had not been printed in the vernacular. Most books had been printed in Latin or Greek, and had to be interpreted to the common people by means of the church, or other highly educated scholars. Writers such as Dante Alighieri, Petrarch, and Boccaccio wrote in Latin when producing a scholarly work, but they were recognized for what they wrote in Italian. They believed that people should also write in the language that was familiar to the people.

Dante and Petrarch are two of the Renaissance's most recognized writers. Dante's ideas and thoughts were similar to those of the Middle Ages, but he lived and wrote like a Renaissance man. His most famous works include, *De Vulgari Eloquentia* – a work that was a treatise, *La Vita Nuova* - The New Life, and his most famous work *The Divine Comedy*. His treatise urged scholars to break away from tradition and write in the vernacular. His other two works were poems and prose which had ideas of passion and dreams rooted in them. His works theology were medieval, but their links to human nature and love were clues of the growing Renaissance. Petrarch was more of a Renaissance writer than Dante. He is recognized for beginning the Renaissance's interest in classical works. He is known as "the father of Humanism." He advocated for progress based on educational reform. His most ambitious work was *Africa*. It showed his passion for ancient works and its incorporation into the age of the Renaissance. The printing press was a major invention of the Renaissance age that allowed more people to study

and afford books. Books and writings could also be printed in masses which made them more accessible, and when printed in the vernacular more widely read and understood. With the invention of the printing press common people no longer had to rely on the church and the scholars to translate books for them and tell them their opinions. The vernacular literature helped the Renaissance to spread beyond the humanists.

Artists and architects also helped the Renaissance idea spread. They really allowed the spirit and ideas of the Renaissance to be displayed in everyday life. The Renaissance was greatly focused on the individual and the classics. Sculptors, artists, and architects combined classical ideas with the humanists idea of emphasis on the individual. Renaissance sculptors focused on creating their subjects as they would be in a particular moment. Two major sculptors of the age were Donatello and Michelangelo. Florentine sculptor Donatello carved statues that were meant to stand alone, and be viewed from every angle. Michelangelo might be most well-known for his painting on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, but he thought of himself first as a sculptor and not a painter. His most famous sculpture is likely his gigantic David created to stand in front of Florence's town hall. The sculpture has the form of the idealistic human body and shows the focus on the individual.

Architects of the Renaissance began to move away from the Gothic style that had originated in France and turned to older Roman styles. Many architects drew their inspiration and even some material from Italy's ruins. Filippo Brunelleschi was one of the first great architects of the Renaissance. The great dome he designed for Florence's cathedral was the largest in the world at the time.

Many architects of the time focused on proportions, symmetry, and perspective. The most ambitious Renaissance architectural project was the remodeling of Europe's largest church St. Peter's. The architects included Donato Bramante, Gianlorenzo Bernini, and, yes, Michelangelo. Michelangelo was the true embodiment of the perfect Renaissance man: a sculptor, painter, architect, and a poet. The reconstruction of St. Peter's took two centuries but was finally completed in the 1600's.

For painters of the Renaissance it was harder for them to look back at ancient artwork because there were not many works to study. So instead of being inspired by classical artwork they were inspired by classical sculptures. While earlier paintings had been of two-dimensional figures against blank backgrounds and combined many scenes in one painting, Renaissance paintings focused on one particular scene or moment in time in a three-dimensional realistic view. Painters of the Renaissance researched perspective and creating the illusion of a three-dimensional area. Most earlier painters would work on wooden boards or walls with wet plaster with tempera, a medium that dried quickly and did not blend well. Northern European painters resolved this issue by mixing their colors with oils. They were also some of the first artists to practice and experiment landscape painting. The Northern artists also invented the use of the canvas as their surface for painting. Italy was introduced to oil painting and painting on canvas in the late fifteenth century. This greatly expanded the market for artwork as the costs for art was reduced and transporting pictures became easy. The church used to dominate as the main commissioners of artwork but as the urban classes began to prosper and art became cheaper more people could afford to commission works of art. The Renaissance was also an era where people

had a craving for luxury. Some of the most recognized artists of the time were Cimabue, Giotto, Masaccio, Raphael, and of course the most famous Leonardo da Vinci.

The Renaissance was the movement that led the way for the new age and romance of the seventeenth and eighteenth century. It reshaped people's views and interest. It was a movement in which looking back to classical literature, architecture, and sculptures allowed people to break away from traditional views, ideas, and practices into a new way to look at things and a new way of thinking.