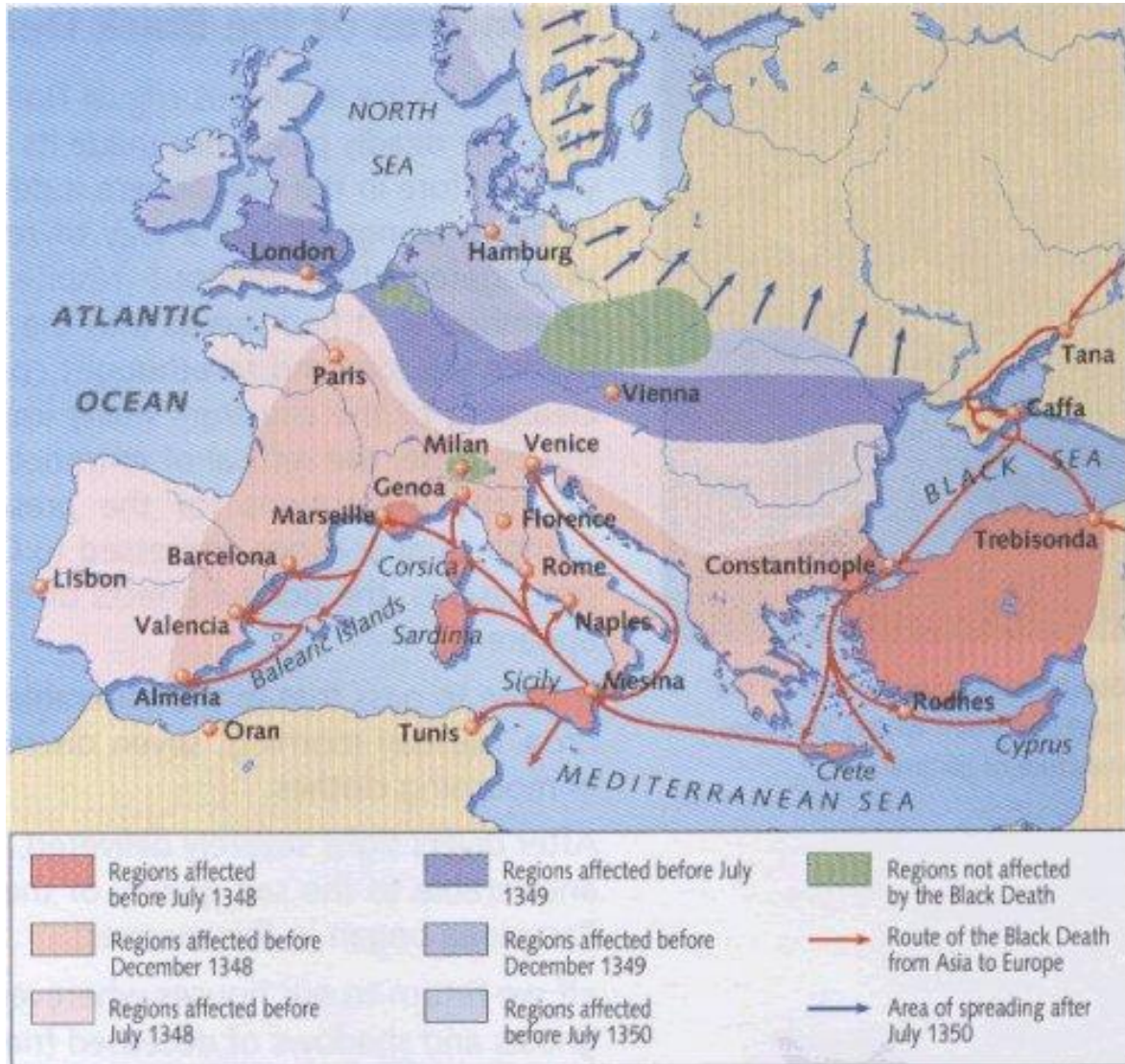


NOTES: THE RENAISSANCE

The Upheavals of the Fourteenth Century

Europe's peak population of 75 million in 1300 was already pushing up against its natural boundaries when the continent was hit by the **Great Famine of 1315 – 1317** and the cataclysmic **Black Death** of 1348 – 1351. The latter represents perhaps the greatest natural disaster in world



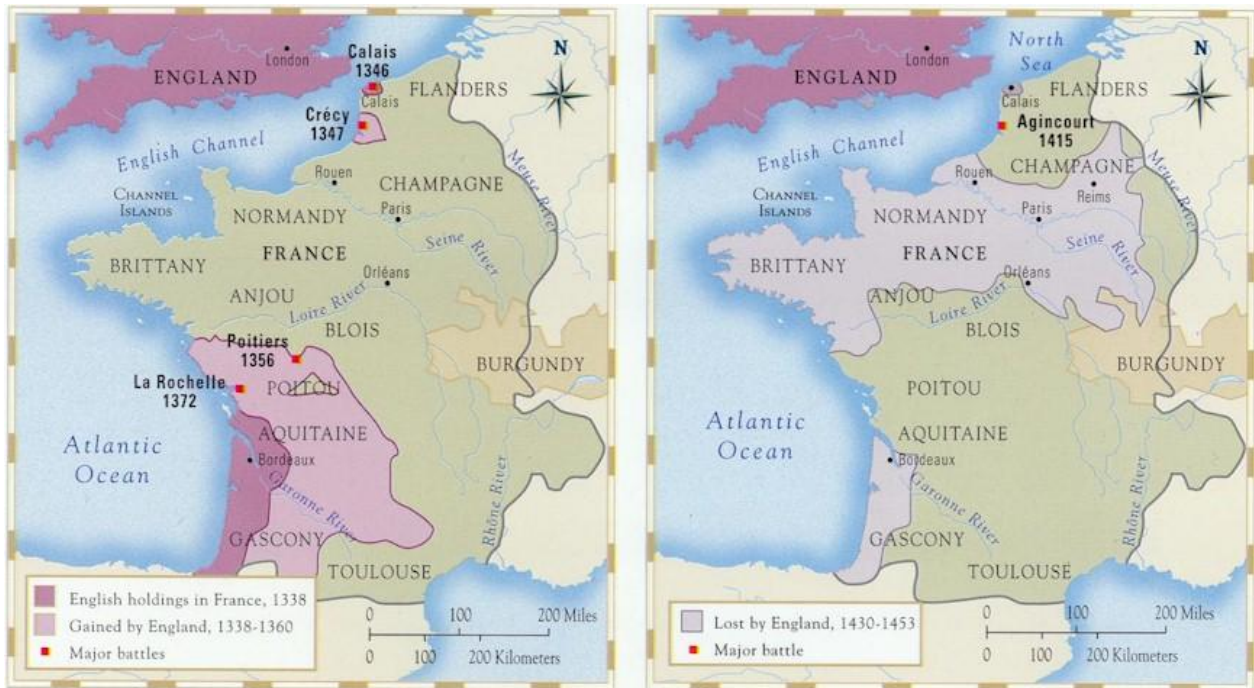
Spread of the Black Death

history, costing Europe upwards of 40% of its people. More important than sheer numbers was perhaps the psychological and social cost of the disease. Caused by fleas traveling on rats, the bubonic plague spread quickly along trade routes and especially devastated urban areas. No one could explain the cause of the pestilence. **Flagellants** took the calamity to be God's wrath upon man and whipped themselves in atonement. Many blamed Jews for poisoning wells, which led to a notorious persecution of that minority in Nuremberg. Art reflected the obsession with death; paintings featured skeletons performing the *danse macabre*. The Catholic Church could offer little solace, especially since the disease killed off well over 60% of the top clergy. Perhaps most significantly, the Black Death caused a labor shortage that undermined the feudal structure, as

peasants bargained for improved labor conditions, winning lifetime tenures and converting other obligations to cash payments.

Improved peasant conditions did not last long. Governments and nobles reasserted their power throughout the century, which led to the *jacquerie* rebellion in 1358 in France and **Wat Tyler's** revolt in 1381 in England. Urban revolts also occurred in Florence; each of these revolts was eventually overturned, often with great violence. Of more lasting import was the blow delivered to the feudal system in the west.

National monarchies were young creations, and therefore fragile. Dynastic instability (e.g., the inability to produce male heirs) plagued many states throughout the 14th century and led most seriously to the **Hundred Years' War** (1337 – 1453). Really a series of wars, this conflict between



5
The Hundred Years' War

France and England over the French throne (and the cloth trade in the Low Countries) also dealt a fatal blow to the medieval idea of warfare. Time and again, English longbowmen demonstrated the power of massed infantry against France's heavily mounted feudal knights. French fortunes revived upon the back of a divinely inspired peasant girl. In 1429, **Joan of Arc** believed the voice of God called her to break the siege at Orleans. Despite her success, Joan was tried for witchcraft and burned at the stake (later made a saint in 1920). Yet the tide had turned, and by 1453, England held only the city of Calais on the continent. Each nation then turned inward to resolve pressing political conflicts.

The Catholic Church also stood in the midst of crisis. Since 1307, the papacy had lived in exile in France during the so-called **Babylonian Captivity**. Though not really a captive of the French monarch as many assumed, the papacy's prestige declined in proportion to the increase in its administrative apparatus and material wealth. When an Italian crowd forced the mostly French cardinals to elect one of their own, the





Europe during the Great Schism

church plunged into the **Great Schism** (1378 – 1417), with rival French and Italian popes forcing the nations of Europe to choose sides. Advocates of **conciliarism** attempted to use church councils (unsuccessfully) to solve the crisis *and* to check the power of the papacy. Reformers such as **John Wycliff** (the **Lollards**) and **John Hus** in Bohemia (part of the Holy Roman Empire) attacked the institutional power and wealth of the church and called for a simpler Christianity. Though Huss was burned at the stake in 1415 at the Council of Constance, his and Wyclif's ideas set the stage for the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century.

The Setting of the Renaissance

Italy was the first area of Europe to experience the Renaissance. Several reasons account for this early lead.

- **Geography** – Italy was not only the center of Mediterranean, which made it a crossroads of trade, it also boasted centers of ancient culture. After all, if artists wanted to imitate classical motifs, they need look no further than their own Roman backyard. Ideas followed in the wake of trade, particularly as humanists escaped the declining Byzantine Empire, being besieged by the Turks (and falling in 1453).
- **Urbanization** – While in most of Europe only 10% of the population lived in cities, up to 25% of Italians partook directly of the civic culture so essential to Renaissance humanism. Cities often act as magnets for trade, ideas, and culture; this was no less true during the Renaissance.
- **Social Factors** – Nobles played a vital role in Italy, just as they did in every European nation, though their attitudes tended to be more oriented to money-making and cultural accomplishments than elsewhere. A common blending of families in Italy involved a cash-strapped aristocrat and an up-and-coming wealthy merchant, thus creating a new elite, where wealth and worldly achievement mattered more than simply status.

- *Political Variety* – In the 14th century, Italy was a collection of small and large city-states. No centralized authority existed to stamp out potentially threatening ideas. If artists or intellectuals found difficulty in one place, they could simply move to another and continue their work. This disunity later became a liability, but at that time, Italy benefited from the multiplicity of competing political centers.

With its thriving city-states, Italy imitated the ancient *poleis* of Greece and the Roman Republic. Citizenship and freedom acted in the ancient world as the sparks of intellectual and cultural life, and the same held true of Renaissance Italy. A major concern of Renaissance thinkers was a life of active civic engagement. The life of the mind (*otium*) must eventually contribute to the bettering of one's city-state (*negotium*). Reflection and action promoted *virtu*, or excellence, in the true Renaissance man or woman.

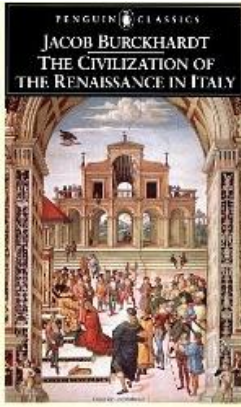
As with today, family acted as a central social institution of the Italian Renaissance. Renaissance families were patriarchal, placing a great deal of power in the male head of the family, or *patria potesta*. Before a man could achieve legal autonomy, his father must officially liberate him before the appropriate authorities. Oftentimes, men were not able to



establish an independent existence until their late 20s or early 30s. At the same time, families commonly married off their daughters as early as their midteens. Marriages were frequently arranged to the benefit of both families. Economic concerns predominated; compatibility of the couple came second, and often not at all, given the significant age difference between man and woman. As a result of this marriage-age gap, Italy experienced some predictable side effects. First, prostitution was rampant, and since it was almost impossible to eliminate, it was generally tolerated and even regulated by governments. Second, the incidence of rape and sexual violence was high, though lower-class men were punished more severely if their victim was from the upper classes. Finally, men often died before their spouses, who remarried quickly due to the difficulties involved in living an independent existence. This led to remarriage, numerous blended families, and an abundance of stepparents. Though the nuclear family (mother, father, and children) acted as the norm, Renaissance Italy also depended on African **slavery**, a result of the labor shortage created by the Black Death. Slaves lived with families and often performed domestic work. Though as much as 10% of Italy's population in 1400 was made up of slaves, the practice in Europe declined with the recovery of the population in the 15th century.

Renaissance Humanism and Art

The term “Renaissance” is the creation of the modern Swiss historian **Jacob Burckhardt** (his *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* was published in 1860). Though the average layperson will tend to view the Renaissance, or “rebirth” of classical culture, as a distinct break from the Middle, or “Dark,” Ages, historians often disagree over how useful this term is in describing a particular time period. One of the difficulties involved in periodization. That is, when do we date the beginning of the Renaissance? **Petrarch** (1304 – 1374), the father of humanism, already argued for a new age as early as the 1340s. However, this is before the Black Death. Does that mean the Black Death stands as a feature of the Renaissance? In addition, one of the great painters of the late medieval period, **Giotto**, acted as a powerful influence on later Renaissance painters. So where do we put Giotto? Even if there is much wisdom in viewing the Renaissance as a continuation of medieval trends, there is little doubt that a new self-consciousness regarding human beings and a new self-assertion is evident in Italy by 1350.



As the name suggests, humanists were fascinated by humans and their potential.

The fabric of **humanism** is woven of several important strands:

- *Secularism* – Humanists encouraged humans to focus their attention on the here-and-now, and less on the afterworld, as had been the tendency during the Middle Ages. Education, self-help manuals, and treatises on civility all reinforced the notion that humans stood to gain rewards – wealth, status, prestige, fame – in the temporal world. Even in religious paintings, humans take on increased significance, while painting itself becomes more of an exercise to glorify the artist than to glorify God.
- *Classics* – Ancient Greece and Rome acted as the moral center of many humanists’ outlook. Collectors of manuscripts, such as Poggio Bracciolini, scoured monasteries, ruins – anywhere – to find evidence of the ancient way of life. For example, the ancient Roman Vitruvius’s *On Architecture* provided a guide to the creation of buildings that imitated the coherent system of columns, arches, and pillars. Also, the recovery of the long-lost Hellenistic sculpture *Laocoon* in the early 16th century inspired Michelangelo to create his masterpiece, *David*. Ancient values and aesthetics, as pre-Christian, told a captivating story with humans at the center, from which humanists took inspiration.
- *Individualism* – By “individualism,” humanists meant not a narrow, selfish conception of human actions, but rather that the focus on learning and human affairs should concern the individual. It was as if humanists had just discovered mankind and could not tear themselves away. This attitude can be seen in the self-consciousness of Petrarch’s verse as well as Castiglione’s suggestions for achieving fame, wealth, and position.
- *Power* – Amid the inspiring philosophy and mesmerizing art, it is easy to forget that the Renaissance was at its heart about human control of the environment. Machiavelli preached this message in politics, but is taken to be the odd man out. In fact, much of what humanists aimed to do was provide society with intellectual tools that could be used to master everything from the globe (cartography), to sound (musical notation), to abstract space (three-dimensional perspective in painting), to business (double-entry bookkeeping), and finally politics. It’s no coincidence that along with the great works of art came exploration/colonization, the centralization of the New Monarchs, and urban planning.

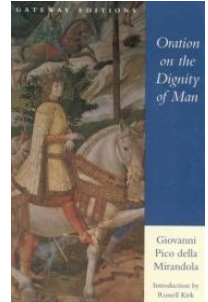
Humanism experienced many expressions – literature, philosophy, education, politics, and, of course, art. As you review the list of representative figures that follows, keep in mind the principles just noted that their work demonstrates.

The Writers and Philosophers

Leonardo Bruni (1369 – 1444): Bruni studied under Chrysoloras, a Greek scholar who had escaped from the faltering Byzantine Empire, and translated ancient Greek texts into Latin. In addition, Bruni served Florence in various political capacities and later wrote a Latin history of the city. He is most famous for his admiration of Cicero, the Roman statesman and model of civic virtue.

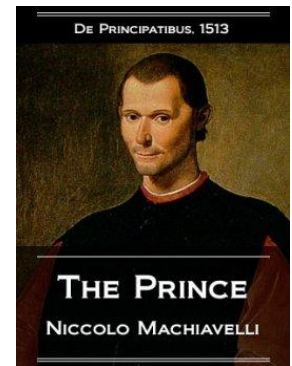
Lorenzo Valla (1406 – 1457): Valla excelled in the discipline of **philology**, or study of ancient languages. Even though a member of the clergy, Valla demonstrated through textual analysis that the “Donation of Constantine,” which supposedly granted the pope authority over political bodies, was a forgery.

Pico della Mirandola (1463 – 1494): A revival of Plato’s philosophy occurred during the Renaissance, and there is no better example of this than Mirandola’s “Oration on the Dignity of Man.” Many consider it the classic statement of human potential. **Neo-Platonism** held that humans had once shared a divine nature and though they had freely chosen to enter the material world, they retained a spark of divinity, which could be recaptured through intellectual and spiritual regeneration.



Lorenzo de' Medici (1449 – 1492): Known as “the Magnificent,” Lorenzo ruled Florence during its Golden Age. A strong advocate of **civic humanism** and a man of diverse interests, Lorenzo is most famous for this patronage of intellectuals and the arts. His untimely death in 1492 led to the invasion of Italy by foreign powers, as well as the decline of Renaissance culture in Florence.

Niccolo Machiavelli (1469 – 1527): One of the most famous figures of the Renaissance, Machiavelli’s claim to fame is ***The Prince***. Dedicated to the Medici family, the book serves as a manual for the realistic ruler who must appear virtuous, wise, and courageous (like a “lion”), at the same time ready to be ruthless and cunning (like a “fox”). Machiavelli denies the traditional notion that the political realm must uphold the laws of God. Politics expresses its own logic in the hard-headed rules of power, or ***raison d’etat*** (reason of state), which is why *The Prince* is often considered the first modern work of political science. It is important to remember the context for Machiavelli’s writing – the invasion of Italy and its subsequent domination by foreign powers. *The Prince*, as well as Machiavelli’s other writings endorsing citizen militias and republican government, can be seen collectively as patriotic appeals for a free and united Italy. After being tortured and losing his position in government, Machiavelli tried desperately to win back his influence, with little success. What is certain is that, fairly or unfairly, Machiavelli’s name is associated with a brand of amoral politics both condemned and practiced since the 16th century.



Petrarch (1304 – 1374): Often called the “**Father of Humanism**,” Petrarch helped popularize the notion that Italy was entering a new age of learning and individualism, distinct from the age of “ignorance” characteristic of the Middle Ages. Petrarch concerned himself with reviving a more pure form of Latin and, as such, spent most of his literary energies composing verse in the language, much of it related to a psychological portrait of humans and the theme of love, where he wrote of his beloved Laura.

Baldassare Castiglione (1478 – 1529): Castiglione first gained fame as a diplomat, but is most known for his ***Book of the Courtier***, a how-to manual on winning fame and influence among the rich and powerful. To gain position and fortune, Castiglione counsels the “Renaissance Man” to be widely read in the classics, including history, poetry, music, and philosophy, as well as know how to conduct himself in public. The courtier will be skilled in the military arts, not to mention cultured and polished. In addition, Castiglione advocated education for women, but of a particular kind: a musical instrument, poetry, and literacy. Abstract subjects such as math and science were reserved for men.



Works in Oil, Marble, and Stone

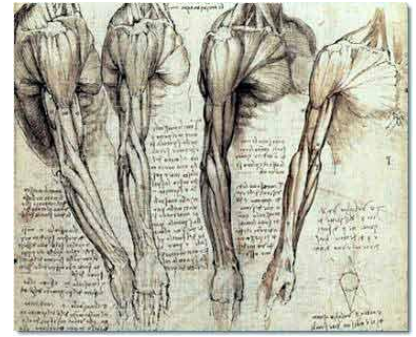
Perhaps the Renaissance is most famous for its amazing production of renowned works of art. Several developments mark the upward trend of Renaissance art:

- *Oil-based paints* – Historically, artists had used tempera paints with an egg base, but with oil-based paints (from the Low Countries), artists could achieve more startling effects with light and shadow by applying layer after thin layer of paint.
- *Perspective* – For centuries, artists had attempted to achieve a realistic effect of three-dimensional space, but their methods tended to be haphazard and approximate. With the rediscovery of theories of optics and perspective geometry, Renaissance painters were able to achieve a strikingly realistic view of a visual plane.



- *Subject Matter* – While artists continued to focus on religious paintings, human beings, natural landscapes, and classical architecture play a more central role in these works.
- *Naturalism*- The Renaissance focus on the human body was reflected in its portrayal on canvas and in stone. Painters and sculptors gave increased attention to musculature and movement of the human body. This emphasis is clearly seen in Michelangelo’s ***Sistine Chapel***, where the master achieves a heroic view of humans, and also da Vinci’s sketches from anatomical dissection.
- *Order and Symmetry* – In all three artistic media, Renaissance creators placed great stock on orderly composition. Architects employed proportion in their use of classical motifs such as the column, dome, and arch.

- *Naturalism*- The Renaissance focus on the human body was reflected in its portrayal on canvas and in stone. Painters and sculptors gave increased attention to musculature and movement of the human body. This emphasis is clearly seen in Michelangelo's **Sistine Chapel**, where the master achieves a heroic view of humans, and also da Vinci's sketches from anatomical dissection.
- *Status of the Artist* – Many artists of the Middle Ages are unknown, primarily because they were considered craftsmen. As patronage by wealthy merchants and the church increased, the reputation of artists as creative geniuses – people set apart – became the standard.



Donatello (1386 – 1466): Donatello revived the free-standing sculpture. His depiction of **David** is the first full-size statue cast in bronze since ancient times. The sculptor imbued his forms with psychological detail and expression, representing Renaissance naturalism.



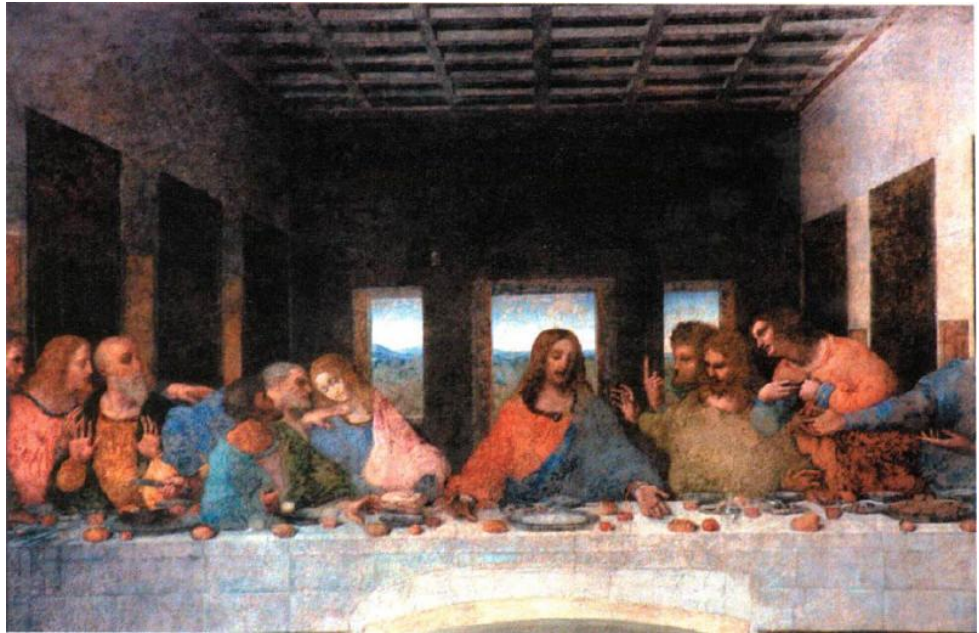
David by Donatello

Masaccio (1401 – 1428): Masaccio employed perspective geometry for the first time in his **Holy Trinity**, and also realized a depth of realism and three-dimensional space in a series of frescoes in the Brancacci Chapel, of which the “Expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden” is a highlight for depicting the agony and shame of the couple. Unfortunately, this master died young.

Fillippo Brunelleschi (1377 – 1446): Though an architect, Brunelleschi expressed interest in all the arts, including cast bronze and painting – it was he who helped develop the use of perspective geometry in painting. By far, Brunelleschi's primary achievement is the massive dome (**Il Duomo**) he created on the Cathedral of Florence, an amazing feat of artistic vision and engineering.



Leonardo da Vinci (1452 – 1519): Perhaps the foremost “Renaissance Man,” da Vinci gained fame for just a few paintings – *Mona Lisa*, *The Last Supper*, and *Madonna of the Rocks*. His diverse interests led him into science, engineering, and anatomy. Da Vinci introduced the notion of systematic observation, which he tracked in his notebooks, written backwards to make it difficult for imitators to steal his ideas.



The Last Supper

Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475 – 1564): With a name synonymous with genius, Michelangelo excelled in all the artistic media – sculpture (*David*, *Pieta*), painting (*Sistine Chapel*, *Last Judgment*), and architecture (*St. Peter's Basilica Dome*, *Laurentian Library*). The master's nudes offer a heroic vision of the human form influenced by neo-Platonic philosophy, though his later works express a darker vision. In addition, Michelangelo composed poetry and was working on another *Pieta* at the age of 89 when he died.

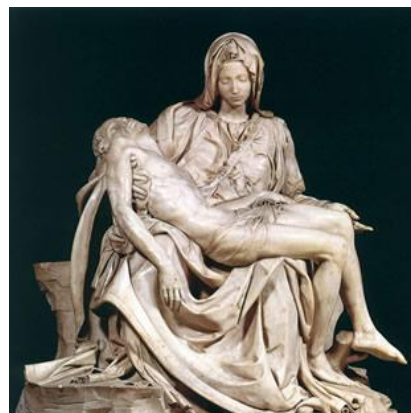


David



Sistine Chapel

Pieta



Raphael (1483 – 1520): The youngest of the great masters, and considered a rival of Michelangelo's, Raphael often sought artistic patronage in Rome, where the Renaissance refocused after about 1490. Raphael's *School of Athens* stands as a tribute to the ancient world and his fellow artists, as the Greek philosophers take on the physical appearance of his contemporaries. In addition, Raphael painted numerous portraits of the Madonna, the Mother of Jesus.



School of Athens

Education and the Printing Press

Renaissance humanism spurred education. Humanists founded schools for both boys and girls, though the latter tended to focus more on keeping appearances rather than mastery of abstract subject matter. **Latin** and **Greek** were prized by scholars of the 15th and 16th centuries, yet a truly well-rounded person needed to be conversant in all the liberal arts – grammar, music, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, rhetoric, and logic – not to mention poetry, horsemanship, and military arts. Renaissance schools included structure and regular promotion of pupils from one level to the next, and in that sense, have influenced the values and curricula of schools today.

Though the Chinese invented printing, they did not capitalize on their success. **Johann Gutenberg** and his colleagues perfected the skill of movable type in the 1450s, publishing their famous Gutenberg Bible, of which several dozens still exist. Books continued to be expensive luxury items for the upper classes, but the dye had been cast. No longer could church or state exercise a monopoly on education of intellectual life. Certainly, the **printing press** assisted in the spread of the Renaissance and helped to establish standard versions of texts, but its most important impact was to secure the success of the Protestant Reformation. Few would deny that the invention of the printing press stands as one of the most, if not *the* most, significant technological developments of the past millennium.

Was there a Renaissance for Women?

Though there were several well-regarded female humanists, women faced significant barriers to their intellectual pursuits. For the most part, the accepted notion was that women's focus lay in the domestic sphere. More enlightened humanists favored education for women, but even this never equaled the type of learning available to men. Nonetheless, women often played key political roles, especially when their statesmen husbands were off at war, and several gained fame for sponsoring the forerunners to the salons of the Enlightenment. In some ways, the status of women declined from the Middle Ages, as they came to be viewed as objects of art or pawns in marriage alliances, a fact accentuated by the gap in average ages between husband and wife. Some famous humanists and early feminists did leave a mark:

Christine de Pisan (1364 –1431): A French noblewoman, de Pisan is believed to have published one of the first modern statements of feminism, *The City of Ladies*, which defends women's intellectual capabilities against antifemale bias. After her husband's death, she fought to retain her property and turned to writing to support her family; she may have been the first woman in European to make a living through her writings.



PORTRAIT OF CHRISTINE DE PISAN.
Seated on a Canopied Chair of carved wood, the back lined with tapestry.
(From *Miniature on MS., in the Burgundy Library, Brantôt.*)
PERIOD: XV. CENTURY.

Isabelle d'Este (1474 – 1539): Often called the “First Lady of the World,” d'Este married into the famous Gonzaga family of Mantua. After her husband departed for war, d'Este conducted diplomacy on his behalf (and sometimes behind his back). She also found time to establish schools for girls, attract humanists to her court, and write hundreds of letters of literary quality.

Laura Cereta (1469 – 1499): Cereta's life illustrates the importance of marriage and early mortality. Her husband died after 18 months of marriage, and rather than enter a convent or remarry, Cereta wrote works advocating equality of opportunity for women. She, too, died young, however.