

# The Art of the Renaissance

Peter and Linda Murray



Peter and Linda Murray  
have collaborated on a number of books  
since their marriage in 1947, notably *The Penguin Dictionary  
of Art and Artists*, now in its fifth edition (an illustrated edition  
was published by Thames and Hudson in 1965). Other books  
by Linda Murray include *The High Renaissance and Manner-  
ism* and *Michelangelo*, both in the World of Art series, and  
*Michelangelo: His Life, Work and Times*; Peter Murray's  
include *The Architecture of the Italian Renaissance*, also in the  
World of Art series. All these are published by Thames and  
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Frontispiece ANTONELLO DA MESSINA *St Jerome in his Study*

# THE ART OF THE RENAISSANCE

Peter and Linda Murray

*251 illustrations, 51 in colour*



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## Chapter One

Renaissance is a word which is very generally understood, but which few people would care to define very closely. This book is almost entirely about the Early Renaissance, about the formation of that style in the arts which, culminating in Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, and Raphael, is still generally used as a touchstone of aesthetic quality. The period is usually reckoned to begin in Italy earlier than elsewhere, in the fifteenth century or at some point in the fourteenth century, perhaps as early as Giotto (died 1337), and to end in the sixteenth century, at any time after the death of Raphael (1520) and before that of Tintoretto (1594). The word itself means 'rebirth', and there can be no doubt that the Italians of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries regarded their own times as immensely superior to all the ages since the fall of the Roman Empire (that is, about a thousand years earlier), and in this opinion posterity has largely concurred. The idea of the rebirth of letters and of the arts after a sleep of a thousand years is an Italian one, as quotation can easily establish. Marsilio Ficino, writing to Paul of Middelburg in 1492, says: 'This century, like a golden age, has restored to light the liberal arts, which were almost extinct: grammar, poetry, rhetoric, painting, sculpture, architecture, music, the ancient singing of songs to the Orphic lyre, and all this in Florence. Achieving what had been honoured among the ancients, but almost forgotten since, the age has joined wisdom with eloquence, and prudence with the military art, and this most strikingly in Federigo, Duke of Urbino, as if proclaimed in the presence of Pallas herself. . . . In you also, my dear Paul, this century appears to have perfected astronomy, and in Florence it has recalled the Platonic teaching from darkness into light. . . .' Half a century earlier, the same ideas were expressed by



Lorenzo Valla in proclaiming the perfections of the Latin language: 'the glory of Latinity was allowed to decay in rust and mould. And many, indeed, and varied are the opinions of wise men on how this happened. I neither accept nor reject any of these, daring only to declare soberly that those arts which are most closely related to the liberal arts, the arts of painting, sculpture, modelling, and architecture, had degenerated for so long and so greatly and had almost died with letters themselves, and that in this age they have been aroused and come to life again, so greatly increased is the number of good artists and men of letters who now flourish. . . .' Thus, the Renaissance was thought of both as a revival of good Latin literature and of the figurative arts. One reason for the apparently overwhelming importance which the men of the age attached to good Latinity was, of course, the fact that it was the common tongue of all educated men—a tiny proportion of the population in any country; another, less obvious, reason was the fact that the new European states were coming into existence; some, like France and England, with centralized monarchies, and others, like most of the Italian states, independent merchant communities. These states needed a professional administrative class, well grounded in Roman Law, which was still a living thing. They were inevitably exponents of the new, lay, learning, which, like the professional studies of the clergy, was based on Latin.

Giorgio Vasari, the painter, wrote the first important book on art history in 1550 (it was so successful that it was reprinted, with many additions, in 1568), and he shared this view of the revival of the arts as a rebirth of antiquity after the long sleep of the Middle Ages. In the Preface to his *Lives of the Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* we find such statements as: 'But in order that it may be understood more clearly what I call "old" and what "ancient", the "ancient" were the works made before Constantine in Corinth, in Athens, in Rome, and in other very famous cities until the time of Nero, the Vespasians, Trajan, Hadrian and Antonius; whereas those others are called "old" that were executed from St Sylvester's day up to that time by a certain remnant of Greeks, who knew rather how to dye than how to paint. . . . For having seen in what way art, from a small beginning, climbed to the greatest height, and how from a state so noble

she fell into utter ruin, and that, in consequence, the nature of this art is similar to that of the others, which, like human bodies, have their birth, their growth, their growing old and their death; they will now be able to recognize more easily the progress of her second birth and of that very perfection whereto she has risen again in our times. . . .’

This self-confident view met with approval in the nineteenth century, and in 1855 we find, for the first time, the word ‘Renaissance’ used—by the French historian Michelet—as an adjective to describe a whole period of history and not confined to the rebirth of Latin letters or a classically inspired style in the arts. Very soon—in 1860 to be precise—it came to have some of that over-life-size glamour which still lingers; when all Italians were conscious exponents of *virtù*, all statesmen Machiavellian, and all Popes either monsters like Alexander VI or splendidly enlightened patrons like Julius II and Leo X. The choice between these latter was not infrequently connected with the political and religious sympathies of the individual historian. Incomparably the greatest monument of this approach to history is Jacob Burckhardt’s *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, first published in 1860 and still an influential book. It was followed, and reinforced for English readers, by John Addington Symonds’s *Renaissance in Italy*. Both these books present a rather romantic account of the period, in which the exuberance of the Italian temperament is occasionally taken at its face value, with results that might have surprised the principals. Symonds was by temperament and upbringing almost entirely antipathetic to everything valuable in Italian civilization, and he wrote from a position which almost automatically disqualified him from a true understanding of the Renaissance—yet his very weaknesses enabled him to write a biography of Michelangelo with sympathy and insight into at least some aspects of that strange genius.

Burckhardt’s pupil and successor, Heinrich Wölfflin, was in some ways more successful. His *Classic Art*, first published in 1899, deals with the art of the Italian Renaissance from an almost exclusively formal point of view, and its analyses of the works of art themselves have hardly been surpassed: on the other hand, Wölfflin did not really attempt to explain the art of the period in terms of anything

but aesthetic impulses, and it is short-sighted to imagine that the sublime pathos of Michelangelo's late *Pietàs* or the fervour of Donatello's *Magdalen* (plate 2) were inspired solely by a Will-to-Form. This avoidance of the fundamental inspiration of Renaissance art is on a par with the current improper usage of the word Humanism: the fact is that Italian art of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, even when treating a 'classical' subject, is entirely Christian in its roots and in its meaning. Even Botticelli's *The Allegory of Spring* (plate 1) has been shown to have a Christian interpretation, esoteric and elaborated though it may be; and there can be no doubt that Masaccio and Donatello, Piero della Francesca and Bellini, were overtly or implicitly Christian, just as much as Fra Angelico or Michelangelo. A century ago it was imagined, because Botticelli painted the *Birth of Venus* (plate 190), because Alberti in his *De re aedificatoria* refers to 'temples' and 'the gods', or because Humanist poets wrote about Mars and Venus or treated astrology seriously, that all these sensible and educated men were neo-pagans, anxious only to promote irreligion and to follow (somewhat tardily) in the footsteps of Julian the Apostate. This fallacy has been encouraged by the modern misuse of the word Humanism to mean 'non-Divine', a sort of substitute religion in which Man is not only the measure of all things but also his own end: thus the modern atheist seeks to supply himself with a spurious ancestry in Pico della Mirandola or Marsilio Ficino.

In fact, Humanism in the Renaissance was *humanitas*, a word adapted by Leonardo Bruni from Cicero and Aulus Gellius to mean those studies which are 'humane'—worthy of the dignity of man. (The word Humanity still survives in the Scottish universities with the meaning of Latin and Greek literature.) They were, of course, distinct from theological studies, but distinction need not imply opposition, and it is essential to realize that the new secular learning was parallel to the older clerical studies rather than opposed to them. Secular learning of some kinds—law, or medicine—was not new; what was novel was the study of language, literature, and philosophy in a new context. This is one explanation for the hero-worshipping attitude to antiquity and especially to the great masters of Latinity—the Humanists were amateurs in theology or medicine, but avid professionals in grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history, and the study of



I BOTTICELLI *Primavera, The Allegory of Spring*

Latin (and some Greek) authors: they invented textual criticism and philology in their concern to re-create antique wisdom and elegant prose. They naturally quoted extensively from classical writers, but they did not distinguish sharply between pagan and Christian classics (except to prefer Cicero's Latin to St Jerome's). A recent historian of Humanism, P. O. Kristeller, in *Renaissance Thought: The Classic, Scholastic, and Humanistic Strains*, has described it thus: 'We can understand what it meant for a Renaissance humanist with religious convictions to attack scholastic theology and to advocate a return to the Biblical and patristic sources of Christianity. It meant that these sources, which after all were themselves the product of antiquity, were considered as the Christian classics which shared the prestige and authority of classical antiquity and to which the same methods of historical and philological scholarship could be applied.' This is equally true of Renaissance artists. Donatello is perhaps the best example, but most of the leading figures of the fifteenth century

used Early Christian and Late Roman art as a source-book, often preferring the dramatic and expressive qualities of Early Christian art to the smoother, more flowing forms of the Augustan period.

Vitruvius was a text book for architects, but the text—known at least from the second decade of the fifteenth century—was so obscure that little attention was paid to it, and, in actual fact, architecture was surprisingly free from the precise imitation of extant remains all through the fifteenth century: the real cult of Antiquity as something to be imitated very closely hardly dates from before the early sixteenth century.

Poggio Bracciolini, who is supposed to have rediscovered a manuscript of Vitruvius in the Swiss monastery of St Gall, wrote a noble lament on the Ruins of Rome and the Mutability of Fortune, which perfectly expresses the nostalgia for the Roman past and the longing of the best minds of the fifteenth century for that Romantic conception of the Golden Age which they hoped to recapture and to bring to a rebirth on Italian soil. In 1430, before any serious attempt had been made by anyone but Brunelleschi, Donatello, and Michelozzo in Florence to re-create the actual architectural forms of the Romans, Poggio wrote: 'Not long ago . . . Antonio Lusco and I . . . used to contemplate the desert places of the city with wonder in our hearts as we reflected on the former greatness of the broken buildings and the vast ruins of the ancient city, and again on the truly prodigious and astounding fall of its great empire and the deplorable inconstancy of fortune. Here, after he had looked about for some time, sighing and as if struck dumb, Antonio declared, "Oh, Poggio, how remote are these ruins from the Capitol that our Virgil celebrated: 'Golden now, once bristling with thorn bushes.' How justly one can transpose this verse and say: 'Golden once, now rough with thorns and overgrown with briars.' But truly I cannot compare the tremendous ruin of Rome to that of any other city; this one disaster so exceeds the calamities of all other cities. . . .

"Surely this city is to be mourned over which once produced so many illustrious men and emperors, so many leaders in war, which was the nurse of so many excellent rulers, the parent of so many and such great virtues, the mother of so many good arts, the city from





2 DONATELLO  
*Magdalen*

which flowed military discipline, purity of morals and life, the decrees of the law, the models of all the virtues, and the knowledge of right living. She who was once mistress of the world is now, by the injustice of fortune, which overturns all things, not only despoiled of her empire and her majesty, but delivered over to the basest servitude, misshapen and degraded, her ruins alone showing forth her former dignity and greatness. . . .

“Yet truly these buildings of the city, both public and private, which it seemed would vie with immortality itself, now in part destroyed entirely, in part broken and overturned—these buildings were believed to lie beyond the reach of fortune. . . .”

Then I answered, “You may well wonder, Antonio. . . . For of all the public and private buildings of this once free city, only some few broken remnants are seen. There survive on the Capitoline the double tier of arcades set into a new building, now a receptacle of the public salt . . . that Q. Lutatius, Q. F., and Q. Catulus, the consuls, had charge of making the substructure and the *Tabularium*; this is an edifice to be revered for its very antiquity. . . .

“This will perhaps seem trivial, but it moves me greatly, that to these monuments I may add . . . only these five marble statues, four in the Baths of Constantine, two standing beside horses—the work of Phidias and Praxiteles—two reclining, and the fifth in the forum of Mars. . . . And there is only one gilded bronze equestrian statue, which was presented to the Lateran basilica by Septimius Severus. . . .

“This Capitoline hill, once the head and centre of the Roman Empire and the citadel of the whole world, before which every king and prince trembled, the hill ascended in triumph by so many emperors and once adorned with the gifts and spoils of so many and such great peoples, the cynosure of all the world, now lies so desolated and ruined, and so changed from its earlier condition, that vines have replaced the benches of the senators, and the Capitol has become a receptacle of dung and filth. . . .”

The shadow of Rome thus lay always over the Italy of the Humanists, and any contribution to the restoration of arts and letters was sufficient to ensure immortality for a writer, an artist, or a patron. Thus, some thirty years after Poggio's threnody, Platina, the historian of the Popes, records that Nicholas V, who had himself been a professional Humanist, ‘began the great vault for the apse of St Peter's, popularly called a tribune, by which the church itself is made more splendid and capable of holding more people. He restored the Milvian bridge and erected a princely palace to house the baths of Viterbo. And it was by his decree that almost all the streets of Rome were cleared and paved.’ Platina records that ‘On his sepulchre this epitaph is fittingly inscribed: Here lie the bones of

the fifth Pope Nicholas, who restored the golden age to you, O Rome. . . .’

Aristocratic societies tend to look back to the achievements of their ancestors, but the Italians of the Renaissance looked much further back into history, to find their spiritual ancestors in ancient Rome. This was because they knew they were attempting something no feudal society could understand, let alone emulate. Modern society—in its managerial, capitalist, and political aspects at any rate—was born in Italy in the Late Middle Ages. The Great Schism of the fourteenth century and the exile of the Papacy in Avignon meant that the one great central (but not hereditary) power was removed from the Italian scene, and the oligarchical societies of Florence and Venice were able to establish themselves as the leading powers of Italy: the ascendancy of Venice was maritime, that of Florence financial. The skill of the Florentines in banking operations and in large-scale enterprises involving international commerce, mostly in the wool trade, meant everyday dealings with England and Burgundy, which in turn meant a very high average of education and culture among the Florentine ruling classes. These classes eventually became the patrons and supporters of the new Humanist art, and, in due time, formed the public which bought the books made available by printing; they were able to exploit their own abilities far more freely than the feudal aristocracy, confined as they were to the Church or to a relatively brutish military career. ‘The Medici family produced numbers of cultured bankers and wool-merchants, a politician with a taste for Platonic philosophy, a poet prince, two popes and a condottiere.’

The numerous Italian schools of painting arose from the different factors in each town—Venice, for example, with its Eastern interests, would naturally be more Byzantine in outlook than Florence. Florence, virtually dominated by the Medici family for sixty years from 1434, lies at the heart of the Renaissance, partly because of her economic power and stability. As soon as the Medici fell, in 1494, the leadership of Italy began to pass to Rome, now once more the centre of a rejuvenated and strong Papacy. The reign of Julius II (1503–13) was one of the great moments of humanity. This was soon to vanish. The new national states, France and England at their head,

were rapidly rising to power, and in 1494 the French learned how easy it was to invade Italy and to subjugate the small individual states: the Italians learned the lesson of unity too late, and, after the appalling Sack of Rome in 1527, France and Spain fought for domination in the distracted peninsula. Not until the late nineteenth century did the Italians again enjoy the liberty to decide their own fate, even though they continued to be the cultural leaders of the world throughout the sixteenth century, and in the seventeenth century the vast spiritual forces of the Counter-Reformation were directed from Rome.

The history of Burgundy in the fifteenth century is almost exactly the opposite. The small Duchy, sandwiched between France and the Empire, was dependent for its livelihood on the ports of Bruges and, later, Antwerp, and on the wool trade with England and Italy. In order to maintain their independence the Dukes of Burgundy, from John the Fearless, murdered by the French in 1419, to Charles the Bold, killed in battle by the Swiss in 1477, made the most of their feudal and aristocratic pretensions, always hoping that Burgundy would truly become the Middle Kingdom that it set out to be. The political use of feudal pomp can be seen in the Order of the Golden Fleece, founded in 1429, which was rigidly aristocratic and exclusive, second only to the Garter. More sensibly, the Dukes maintained an uneasy series of alliances, mainly with the English, whose wool they needed, against the French, whose depredations they feared. The marriage of Duke Charles the Bold to Margaret of York in 1468 was part of this policy, all of which collapsed when Charles was killed at Nancy by the Swiss allies of Louis XI of France. Eventually Burgundy passed to the Empire and, when Spain and the Empire were united by Charles V, Burgundy was one of the reasons for the Franco-Spanish struggle fought out in Italy in the sixteenth century.