

Renaissance Europe

DE LAMAR JENSEN

Age of Recovery and Reconciliation



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DE LAMAR JENSEN Brigham Young University

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*To my wife, Mary, and to our children,
Jonna Lu, Marde, Brad, Emily, and Christine.*

COVER PHOTO: A detail from Domenico Ghirlandaio's "Zacharias in the Temple," depicting (from left to right) Marcilio Ficino, Christoforo Landino, Angelo Poliziano, and Demetrius Chalcondilas, all noted fifteenth-century humanists. (Editorial Photocolor Archives, Inc)

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Preface

My quest in the following pages may be as impossible a dream as that of the ingenious knight of La Mancha when he went out with lance and shield to overthrow evil. Yet, however short of our goals we may fall, any success, however small, is a victory not to be discounted. The purpose of *Renaissance Europe* (and its companion, *Reformation Europe*) is to present the civilization of Europe during those times as a whole in all of its varied colors and hues—its violence and compassion, hatred and love, destructiveness and creativity—in a way that the reader may comprehend its complexity and understand its important lessons. For history does teach by example, and in no other period of history are the examples more relevant and instructive for our time.

The age of the Renaissance—from approximately the middle of the fourteenth century to the middle of the sixteenth (1350–1550)—was a time of great change and diversity, a dynamic period of discovery, exploration, and expansion, not only in geography but also in politics, economics, religion, art, and science. It was an age of reform, one in which many old ideas and institutions were challenged and changed. The parallels between Renaissance and contemporary history are more than superficially striking, not so much in collateral events as in the similarity of their effects.

Reflect, for example, on the parallel between the “informational revolution” of our day, a product

of sophisticated electronic technology, and the dramatic impact of printing in the Renaissance; or on the correlation between the rise of Renaissance monarchies and the modern emergence of new nations. And who cannot recognize the related philosophical implications of the discovery of the New World and the explorations of outer space—which may yet disclose commensurate economic and political consequences?

It is my hope that readers of this volume will catch the spirit and meaning of the dynamic age of Renaissance, or “rebirth”; sense the creative power of Michelangelo and Dürer; understand the political problems and challenges of Lorenzo the Magnificent and Isabel of Castile; feel the moral courage of Wyclif and John Hus; experience the excitement of the discoveries of Columbus and Copernicus; cultivate a thirst for knowledge like that of Leonardo da Vinci and Pico della Mirandola; and appreciate the fortitude of millions of human beings who lived, worked, fought, built, suffered, and died during that epoch. Their lives have enriched our own in countless ways.

Suggestions for Further Reading

The short bibliographical essays following each chapter have been written to assist the student in making purposeful selections of additional reading material, either for more extensive study or for enjoyment—or both. I feel that this is better achieved by a limited number of good books, accompanied by brief comments or evaluations, than by long impersonal lists of authors and titles.

To keep these bibliographies as brief and functional as possible, the following criteria have been used: (1) Despite the enormous amount of important historical literature in foreign languages, only works written in English or translated into English are included. (2) Source materials are not included, except in certain cases in which the modern work contains particularly useful documents. (3) In order to make these bibliographies as current as possible, the most recent works are cited. Those written before 1960 are included only if they have been reissued in later editions or are of unique value. (4) First priority has been given to full-length books, but shorter essays and journal articles are sometimes included when these are the best, or only, studies of a particular topic.

Acknowledgments

I gratefully acknowledge my debt to the many others who have preceded me in summarizing this period of history and to those who have collected documents, published monographs and articles, written reviews, and presented lectures and papers. Their work is invaluable for anyone wishing to understand history and appreciate its great relevance and significance today. To the many colleagues, teachers, students, friends, and members of my family who have assisted me indi-

vidually or collectively, I express particular thanks, especially to a generation of interested and challenging students at Brigham Young University, with whom I have shared ideas and from whom I have learned much over the years. Several colleagues and other experts have read parts or all of these chapters and have given priceless advice and suggestions for their improvement. I need not mention them by name, but they know of my gratitude.

Having been able to incorporate into this volume some of the information and interpretations gained while doing research in Europe on more specialized studies supported by grants from the Institute of International Education, the Rockefeller Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and most recently from the Guggenheim Foundation, I gratefully acknowledge their interest and help. I also wish to express appreciation to the editors and others at D.C. Heath for their expert advice and assistance, particularly Ann Knight, Bryan Woodhouse, and Dorothy Williams. Finally, and most importantly, my wife and children have endured, without complaint, many inconveniences and frustrations, as a direct result of the time I have devoted to this book over a period of many years. My daughter Christine has also assisted me in preparing the index.

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INTRODUCTION

The Meaning of The Renaissance



HE "RENAISSANCE" is a term with many meanings. To Jacob Burckhardt, the nineteenth-century Swiss historian and art critic who marked the starting point of all modern interpretations of the Renaissance with his great *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860), it was the spirit of self-discovery and fulfillment, of recognition of human worth, and a dynamic outpouring of artistic activity. It was also the beginning of modern times, for Renaissance Italy was "the first-born among the sons of modern Europe." Since Burckhardt's time, many have criticized his interpretation, some justly and others unjustly. He did overemphasize the cultural break between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance and failed to recognize the equally marked distinctions between Renaissance society and the modern industrial world. History, after all, is both continuity and change. He probably laid too much stress on individualism and secularism as Renaissance characteristics and not enough on its deep religious content. Yet his recognition of the dynamic nature of Renaissance society and its cultural grounding in classical literature and art is well founded and important.

Many subsequent assessments have concentrated on aspects of the Renaissance controversy, such as economic and social history and the history of science, that were generally neglected by Burckhardt. The great Dutch historian Johan

Huizinga saw the Renaissance—in France and the Netherlands at least—as the decline of medieval culture. George Sarton criticized the Renaissance humanists' lack of interest in science, and Lynn Thorndike accused them of setting back the progress of science a hundred years or more. More recently, Robert Sabatino Lopez has emphasized the financial recession and stagnation of early Renaissance economy. In a different vein, Hans Baron sees the key to Renaissance culture in the "civic humanism" of early fifteenth-century Florence; Wallace Ferguson finds it in the predominance of Italian urban life; B. L. Ullman in the high level of poetic achievement; Robert Ergang defines it as the secularization of society; and Denys Hay recognizes it as an overall style of living.

There is truth and value in all of these interpretations. Yet the problem of the Renaissance is compounded by the use of the term in so many different ways. Most scholars would agree that *Renaissance* implies something of all of these, not just a "rebirth," as the word suggests. But the difficulty arises when we start being specific as to the exact ingredients and their proportions. What characteristics distinguish Renaissance man, woman, art, thought, politics, or poetry from their medieval counterparts? Or are these arbitrary labels employed by the historian to facilitate organizing and explaining the past? *Renaissance* is partly that. But I believe it also has meaning in terms of thought, expression, attitude, and style.

To begin with, the Renaissance was a period of time, like any other, during which people revealed their character, personality, feelings, and aspirations by what they thought and did. But the Renaissance was also unique in many ways. In addition to common features it shared with earlier and later periods, it had distinct characteristics as well. These characteristics, revealed in certain attitudes, institutions, and creations, did not originate or terminate at any precise date. Therefore, it is impossible to impose a rigid time frame on the period. Nevertheless, by the latter half of the fourteenth century (the 1300s), as Europe was gradually recovering from the heaviest ravages of the Black Death, many of these Renaissance characteristics were coming into play. Some of them had started decades or even centuries earlier; some would not appear until many years later. Yet by the time of Petrarch's and Boccaccio's deaths (in 1374 and 1375, respectively), as their disciples were carrying the ideals of humanism into all parts of Italy, the spirit of the Renaissance was beginning to manifest itself on a large-enough scale to distinguish it as a major movement, not just the expression of a few isolated writers or artists of genius. Its manifestations were most pronounced in Italy from the late fourteenth to the early sixteenth centuries (roughly 1375 to 1525) and in the rest of Europe from the late fifteenth to the early seventeenth centuries (roughly 1475 to 1625). It was bounded by crises, at one end by the Black Death (1348–51) and at the other by the devastating Thirty Years' War (1618–48).

What was the philosophical framework of this period, and the es-

sence of its spirit? Part of it was an outlook on life that encouraged a higher regard for human attributes and destiny and a greater appreciation of physical beauty—both manmade objects and those seen in nature. Related to this attitude was a growing consciousness of people as beings in time as well as space, an awareness of the dimension of history and mankind's place in it. This awareness justified the promotion of literature and scholarship to better understand the past, and suggested the continuing role and responsibilities of people in society.

Not only were people historical beings but also political ones, citizens whose privilege and duty it was to participate actively and directly in government. Such notions of participation are best illustrated in the Italian city-states, but also reveal a broader shift away from the medieval concept of *Respublica Christiana*—the notion of a single commonwealth composing all of Latin Christendom—toward the establishment of territorial or national states, larger than the local jurisdictions of the medieval nobles yet smaller than the whole of Europe. With this change came new institutions of government and a new outlook on the nature and dynamics of international relations and the techniques of diplomacy. Political relations were also affected by the fluidity and range of expanding commercial relations, which brought Renaissance Europeans into closer contact with one another and with the wider world.

All of these developments took place within the context and laws of the institutionalized church. But many of these ideas ran counter to some of the traditional practices and beliefs of the church as interpreted by those exercising ecclesiastical authority, and tension began to develop that eventually led to conflict and upheaval all over Europe.

Obviously, no single feature of Renaissance times adequately describes the age. How could it, when even a single life is too complex to summarize, let alone an entire civilization—especially a civilization so rich in contrasts? Yet through the maze of conflict and contradictions, some features seem to stand out like prominent mountain peaks as landmarks to guide us to a better understanding of the age. One of these is embodied in the term *recovery* in both its meanings—"to recuperate from some unhappy condition" and "to regain something that has been lost."

In the first sense, the Renaissance was an age of recovery from the calamitous fourteenth century, which was "a violent, tormented, bewildered, suffering and disintegrating age," according to Barbara Tuchman's vivid description, "a time, as many thought, of Satan triumphant." The Renaissance was an era of recuperation from the consequences of the Black Death, which had wiped out more than one-third of the total population, and the crisis of faith and despair associated with it; from war and political disorder bordering on chaos; and from devastating economic depression. It was also a time of gradual adjustment to the colder, wetter weather and shorter growing seasons of the so-called Little Ice Age that began in the fourteenth century.

From the final quarter of that century on, Italian sources repeatedly refer to recovery and revival, and a distinct consciousness of having survived a holocaust and now being part of a period of rebuilding. In their recovery from the crises, many survivors established a tradition of courage and resolution that carried them forward into a new life, a rebirth, so to speak.

Succeeding generations took pride in their achievements and in those of their ancestors, whose surrounding monuments reminded them of ancient sacrifices and glories. Increasingly aware of its own historical heritage, the Renaissance age sparked a rebirth of the classical spirit, a recovery of the ancient Greco-Roman culture that had once civilized the Mediterranean world. This recovery and restoration of classical literature, art, and ideas was a motivating feature of the Renaissance search for the meaning of life and pervaded all activities from politics to philosophy. The classics were seen as relevant to contemporary society and were made an intimate part of Renaissance letters.

Moreover, the recovery of classical antiquity was taken as a step in the broader reconciliation of the diverse aspects of human life and thought. The Renaissance humanists hoped to reconcile and harmonize the ancient world with the present, pagan philosophy with Christian theology, scholarship with faith, action with contemplation. The ideal of the "well-rounded individual," or the "complete man," was the realization of a broad integration of the many paradoxes and contradictory ingredients that make up human beings. The spirit of the Renaissance emphasized not only human dignity and worth, but also the composite human nature and its capacity to harmonize its contradictions and reconcile society, nature, and God. Obviously, these goals were seldom reached, but they represented values and motivations that gave some coherence to the period, despite its remarkable diversity.

Finally, a feature of the Renaissance that gave further meaning and cogency to the age was its spirit of growth and expansion. Although the characteristics I have described appeared first in Italy during the late fourteenth century and reached their fullest expression there in the fifteenth (the *quattrocento*, or 1400s), some of these ideals and values spread to other parts of Europe and provided a classical component to European style from the late-fifteenth to the mid-seventeenth centuries. This was a time of dramatic political, economic, geographical, and intellectual expansion, when new worlds were being discovered and explored, and new horizons were first viewed. It was also a period of intense religious bigotry, personal cruelty, and wholesale destruction, as well as a time of spiritual devotion and deep artistic sensitivity. Above all, it was a time of change—an age of boldness, innovation, and revolution. New concepts and techniques of government, diplomacy, economics, and religion were injected into the traditional life-style and thought of western Europe.

Yet men and women of the Renaissance sought desperately to har-

monize and synthesize these contradictions and to retain the unified, integrated, and orderly universe their predecessors had thought they lived in. Although different from the medieval period, even antagonistic to it in some ways, the age of the Renaissance tried to reconcile the Ancient World with the Middle Ages and link them into a larger synthesis. It aspired to end not only the dichotomy between paganism and Christianity but also that between heaven and earth, and to create a world of consistency and concord. This Renaissance reconciliation reached its climax in the early sixteenth century with giants like Leonardo da Vinci, Pico della Mirandola, Desiderius Erasmus, Albrecht Dürer, Baldassare Castiglione, Sir Thomas More, and Raphael Sanzio. Then its very foundations were shaken by the Reformation, and a new era of stress and upheaval ensued. Even after that, the thread of reconciliation and synthesis was not entirely broken, and the search for stability and order was continued in the seventeenth century.

Suggestions for Further Reading

GENERAL: RENAISSANCE AND REFORMATION

The age of the Renaissance and Reformation has been the subject of many good books, from Henry S. Lucas's long-standard, *The Renaissance and the Reformation*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1960) to Charles G. Nauert's latest, very brief, *The Age of Renaissance and Reformation* (Hinsdale, 1977). They all have strengths and weaknesses. S. Harrison Thomson, *Europe in Renaissance and Reformation* (New York, 1963) is especially strong on Eastern Europe, although too heavy and encyclopedic. V.H.H. Green, *Renaissance and Reformation: A Survey of European History between 1450 and 1660*, 2d ed. (London, 1965) is a fast-moving political history but gives insufficient attention to cultural and intellectual matters. More balanced is Lewis W. Spitz, *The Renaissance and Reformation Movements* (Chicago, 1971). Other surveys include P. J. Helm, *History of Europe, 1450-1660* (New York, 1964), and M. L. Bush, *Renaissance, Reformation and the Outer World* (London, 1967).

Three sound but very short summaries are J. Russell Major, *The Age of the Renaissance and Reformation: A Short History* (Philadelphia, 1970); A. G. Dickens, *The Age of Humanism and Reformation* (Englewood Cliffs, 1972); and J.F.H. New, *Renaissance and Reformation: A Short History*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1977). Richard L. DeMolen, ed., *The Meaning of the Renaissance and Reformation* (Boston, 1974) is a collection of eight essays on broad topics of the period. Robert M. Kingdon, ed., *Transition and Revolution: Problems and Issues of European Renaissance and Reformation History* (Minneapolis, 1974) includes useful selections of source readings. Another excellent introduction, more general than its title suggests, is Donald J. Wilcox, *In Search of God and Self: Renaissance and Reformation Thought* (Boston, 1975).

THE RENAISSANCE

Reliable accounts of the Renaissance alone include Wallace K. Ferguson, *Europe in Transition, 1300-1520* (Boston, 1962), a solid if somewhat imposing study; Robert Ergang, *The Renaissance* (Princeton, 1967), which sees the Renaissance as

a secularization of life, thought, and culture; Denys Hay, *Europe in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries* (New York, 1966), a keen analysis of Renaissance society by one of its leading authorities; and Ernst Breisach, *Renaissance Europe, 1300–1517* (New York, 1973), a very good coverage of all aspects of Renaissance life. A splendid little book with many useful illustrations is Margaret Aston, *The Fifteenth Century: The Prospect of Europe* (New York, 1968) in the Harcourt Brace History of European Civilization Library, edited by Geoffrey Barraclough. Eugene F. Rice, *The Foundations of Early Modern Europe, 1460–1559* (New York, 1970), and De Lamar Jensen, *The Renaissance World* (St. Louis, 1979) are briefer general summaries.

A solid series on cultural and social history in Renaissance Italy, edited by J. R. Hale, includes John Larner, *Culture and Society in Italy, 1290–1420* (New York, 1971), which describes the interaction between literature, art and society; Peter Burke, *Culture and Society in Renaissance Italy, 1420–1540* (New York, 1972), which is especially good on the social institutions of Renaissance Italy and their relationship to the great artists and writers; and Oliver Logan, *Culture and Society in Venice, 1470–1790* (New York, 1972), an engaging study of Venice's golden age. Peter Laven, *Renaissance Italy, 1464–1534* (London, 1966) sees the age in terms of change and reorganization in the whole of Italy.

Finally, a number of collected essays provide some of the most important insights into the age. Among the best of these are Charles S. Singleton, ed., *Art, Science and History in the Renaissance* (Baltimore, 1967), a product of the Johns Hopkins Humanities Seminar; J. H. Plumb, ed., *The Horizon Book of the Renaissance* (New York, 1962), sumptuously illustrated, as is Denys Hay, ed., *The Age of the Renaissance* (London & New York, 1967). E. F. Jacob, ed., *Italian Renaissance Studies* (London, 1960) is a tribute to Cecilia M. Ady. Anthony Molho and John Tedeschi, eds., *Renaissance: Studies in Honor of Hans Baron* (Dekalb, 1971), and J. G. Rowe and W. H. Stockdale, eds., *Florilegium Historiale: Essays Presented to Wallace K. Ferguson* (Toronto, 1971) contain more valuable essays.

RENAISSANCE INTERPRETATIONS

The classic interpretation of the Renaissance is Jacob Burckhardt's *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860 and many editions since). The standard analysis of this and other interpretations is Wallace K. Ferguson, *The Renaissance in Historical Thought: Five Centuries of Interpretation* (Boston, 1948). More recent views and debates can be found in Denys Hay, *The Italian Renaissance in Its Historical Background* (Cambridge, 1961), which sees the Renaissance as a growing and changing series of attitudes and ideas, and in the essays published in Tinsley Helton, ed., *The Renaissance: A Reconsideration of the Theories and Interpretations of the Age* (Madison, 1964); Wallace K. Ferguson, *The Renaissance: Six Essays* (New York, 1962) and *Renaissance Studies* (New York, 1970); Denys Hay, ed., *The Renaissance Debate* (New York, 1965, 1976); Robert Schwoebel, ed., *Renaissance Men and Ideas* (New York, 1971); and Karl H. Dannenfeldt, ed., *The Renaissance: Basic Interpretations*, 2nd ed. (Lexington, 1974), in the D. C. Heath Problems in European Civilization series. George C. Sellery, *The Renaissance: Its Nature and Origins* (Madison, 1950, 1962) is a very critical essay showing that the Renaissance was simply an evolution of medieval society. In *The Renaissance in Perspective* (New York, 1973) Philip Lee Ralph places the Renaissance in the broader perspective of Western history and culture.