THE HUMANISTIC TRADITION

THIRD EDITION

Gloria K. Fiero

3 The European Renaissance, the Reformation, and Global Encounter

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McGraw-Hill

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Preface

"It's the most curious thing I ever saw in all my life!" exclaimed Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland, as she watched the Cheshire Cat slowly disappear, leaving only the outline of a broad smile. "I've often seen a cat without a grin, but a grin without a cat!" A student who encounters an ancient Greek epic, a Yoruba mask, or a Mozart opera—lacking any context for these works—might be equally baffled. It may be helpful, therefore, to begin by explaining how the artifacts (the "grin") of the humanistic tradition relate to the larger and more elusive phenomenon (the "cat") of human culture.

The Humanistic Tradition and the Humanities

In its broadest sense, the term *humanistic tradition* refers to humankind's cultural legacy—the sum total of the significant ideas and achievements handed down from generation to generation. This tradition is the product of responses to conditions that have confronted all people throughout history. Since the beginnings of life on earth, human beings have tried to ensure their own survival by achieving harmony with nature. They have attempted to come to terms with the inevitable realities of disease and death. They have endeavored to establish ways of living collectively and communally. And they have persisted in the desire to understand themselves and their place in the universe. In response to these ever-present and universal challenges—*survival, communality,* and *self-knowledge*—human beings have created and transmitted the tools of science and technology, social and cultural institutions, religious and philosophic systems, and various forms of personal expression, the sum total of which we call culture.

Even the most ambitious survey cannot assess all manifestations of the humanistic tradition. This book therefore focuses on the creative legacy referred to collectively as *the humanities*: literature, philosophy, history (in its literary dimension), architecture, the visual arts (including photography and film), music, and dance. Selected examples from each of these disciplines constitute our *primary sources*. Primary sources (that is, works original to the age that produced them) provide first-hand evidence of human inventiveness and ingenuity. The primary sources in this text have been chosen on the basis of their authority, their beauty, and their enduring value. They are, simply stated, the great works of their time and, in some cases, of all time. Universal in their appeal, they have been transmitted from generation to generation. Such works are, as well, the landmark examples of a specific time and place: They offer insight into the ideas and values of the society in which they were produced. The drawings of Leonardo da Vinci, for example, reveal a passionate determination to understand the operations and functions of nature. And while Leonardo's talents far exceeded those of the average individual of his time, his achievements may be viewed as a mirror of the robust curiosity that characterized his time and place—the age of the Renaissance in Italy. *The Humanistic Tradition* surveys such landmark works, but joins "the grin" to "the cat" by examining them within their political, economic, and social contexts.

The Humanistic Tradition explores a living legacy. History confirms that the humanities are integral forms of a given culture's values, ambitions, and beliefs. Poetry, painting, philosophy, and music are not, generally speaking, products of unstructured leisure or indulgent individuality; rather, they are tangible expressions of the human quest for the good (one might even say the "complete") life. Throughout history, these forms of expression have served the domains of the sacred, the ceremonial, and the communal. And even in the waning days of the twentieth century, as many time-honored traditions have come under assault, the arts retain their power to awaken our imagination in the quest for survival, communality, and self-knowledge.

The Scope of the Humanistic Tradition

The humanistic tradition is not the exclusive achievement of any one geographic region, race, or class of human beings. For that reason, this text assumes a global and multicultural rather than exclusively Western perspective. At the same time, Western contributions are emphasized, first, because the audience for these books is predominantly Western, but also because in recent centuries the West has exercised a dominant influence on the course and substance of global history. Clearly, the humanistic tradition belongs to all of humankind, and the best way to understand the Western contribution to that tradition is to examine it in the arena of world culture.

As a survey, *The Humanistic Tradition* cannot provide an exhaustive analysis of our creative legacy. The critical reader will discover many gaps. Some aspects of culture that receive extended examination in traditional Western humanities surveys have been pared down to make room for the too often neglected contributions of

Islam, Africa, and Asia. This book is necessarily selective—it omits many major figures and treats others only briefly. Primary sources are arranged, for the most part, chronologically, but they are presented as manifestations of *the informing ideas of the age* in which they were produced. The intent is to examine the evidence of the humanistic tradition thematically and topically, rather than to compile a series of mini-histories of the individual arts.

Studying the Humanistic Tradition

To study the creative record is to engage in a dialogue with the past, one that brings us face to face with the values of our ancestors, and, ultimately, with our own. This dialogue is (or should be) a source of personal revelation and delight; like Alice in Wonderland, our strange, new encounters will be enriched according to the degree of curiosity and patience we bring to them. Just as lasting friendships with special people are cultivated by extended familiarity, so our appreciation of a painting, a play, or a symphony depends on close attention and repeated contact. There are no shortcuts to the study of the humanistic tradition, but there are some techniques that may be helpful. It should be useful, for instance, to approach each primary source from the triple perspective of its *text*, its *context*, and its *subtext*.

The Text: The *text* of any primary source refers to its *medium* (that is, what it is made of), its *form* (its outward shape), and its *content* (the subject it describes). All literature, for example, whether intended to be spoken or read, depends on the medium of words—the American poet Robert Frost once defined literature as "performance in words." Literary form varies according to the manner in which words are arranged. So poetry, which shares with music and dance rhythmic organization, may be distinguished from prose, which normally lacks regular rhythmic pattern. The main purpose of prose is to convey information, to narrate, and to describe; poetry, by its freedom from conventional patterns of grammar, provides unique opportunities for the expression of intense emotions. Philosophy (the search for truth through reasoned analysis) and history (the record of the past) make use of prose to analyze and communicate ideas and information. In literature, as in most kinds of expression, content and form are usually interrelated. The subject matter or the form of a literary work determines its *genre*. For instance, a long narrative poem recounting the adventures of a hero constitutes an *epic*, while a formal, dignified speech in praise of a person or thing constitutes a *eulogy*.

The visual arts—painting, sculpture, architecture, and photography—employ a wide variety of media, such as wood, clay, colored pigments, marble, granite, steel, and (more recently) plastic, neon, film, and computers.

The form or outward shape of a work of art depends on the manner in which the artist manipulates the formal elements of color, line, texture, and space. Unlike words, these formal elements lack denotative meaning. The artist may manipulate form to describe and interpret the visible world (as in such genres as portraiture and landscape painting); to generate fantastic and imaginative kinds of imagery; or to create imagery that is nonrepresentational—without identifiable subject matter. In general, however, the visual arts are spatial, that is, they operate and are apprehended in space.

The medium of music is sound. Like literature, music is durational: It unfolds over the period of time in which it occurs. The formal elements of music are melody, rhythm, harmony, and tone color—elements that also characterize the oral life of literature. As with the visual arts, the formal elements of music are without symbolic content, but while literature, painting, and sculpture may imitate or describe nature, music is almost always nonrepresentational—it rarely has meaning beyond the sound itself. For that reason, music is the most difficult of the arts to describe in words. It is also (in the view of some) the most affective of the arts. Dance, the artform that makes the human body itself a medium of expression, resembles music in that it is temporal and performance-oriented. Like music, dance exploits rhythm as a formal tool, but, like painting and sculpture, it unfolds in space as well as time.

In analyzing the text of a work of literature, art, or music, we ask how its formal elements contribute to its meaning and affective power. We examine the ways in which the artist manipulates medium and form to achieve a characteristic manner of execution and expression that we call *style*. And we try to determine the extent to which a style reflects the personal vision of the artist and the larger vision of his or her time and place. Comparing the styles of various artworks from a single era, we may discover that they share certain defining features and characteristics. Similarities (both formal and stylistic) between, for instance, golden age Greek temples and Greek tragedies, between Chinese lyric poems and landscape paintings, and between postmodern fiction and pop sculpture, prompt us to seek the unifying moral and aesthetic values of the cultures in which they were produced.

The Context: We use the word *context* to describe the historical and cultural environment. To determine the context, we ask: In what time and place did the artifact originate? How did it function within the society in which it was created? Was the purpose of the piece decorative, didactic, magical, propagandistic? Did it serve the religious or political needs of the community? Sometimes our answers to these questions are mere guesses. Nevertheless, understanding the function of an

artifact often serves to clarify the nature of its form (and vice versa). For instance, much of the literature produced prior to the fifteenth century was spoken or sung rather than read; for that reason, such literature tends to feature repetition and rhyme, devices that facilitate memorization. We can assume that literary works embellished with frequent repetitions, such as the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and the Hebrew Bible, were products of an oral tradition. Determining the original function of an artwork also permits us to assess its significance in its own time and place: The paintings on the walls of Paleolithic caves, which are among the most compelling animal illustrations in the history of world art, are not "artworks" in the modern sense of the term but, rather, magical signs that accompanied hunting rituals, the performance of which was essential to the survival of the community. Understanding the relationship between text and context is one of the principal concerns of any inquiry into the humanistic tradition.

The Subtext: The *subtext* of the literary or artistic object refers to its secondary and implied meanings. The subtext embraces the emotional or intellectual messages embedded in, or implied by, a work of art. The epic poems of the ancient Greeks, for instance, which glorify prowess and physical courage in battle, suggest that such virtues are exclusively male. The state portraits of the seventeenth-century French ruler Louis XIV carry the subtext of unassailable and absolute power. In our own century, Andy Warhol's serial adaptations of soup cans and Coca-Cola bottles offer wry commentary on the supermarket mentality of postmodern American culture. Identifying the implicit message of an artwork helps us to determine the values and customs of the age in which it was produced and to assess those values against others.

Beyond *The Humanistic Tradition*

This book offers only small, enticing samples from an enormous cultural buffet. To dine more fully, students are encouraged to go beyond the sampling presented at this table; and for the most sumptuous feasting, nothing can substitute for first-hand experience. Students, therefore, should make every effort to supplement this book with visits to art museums and galleries, concert halls, theaters, and libraries. *The Humanistic Tradition* is designed for students who may or may not be able to read music, but who surely are able to cultivate an appreciation of music in performance. The clefs that appear in the text refer to the forty-five Music Listening Selections found on two accompanying cassettes, available from the publishers. Lists of suggestions for further reading are included at the end of each chapter, while a selected general bibliography of humanities resources appears at the end of each book.
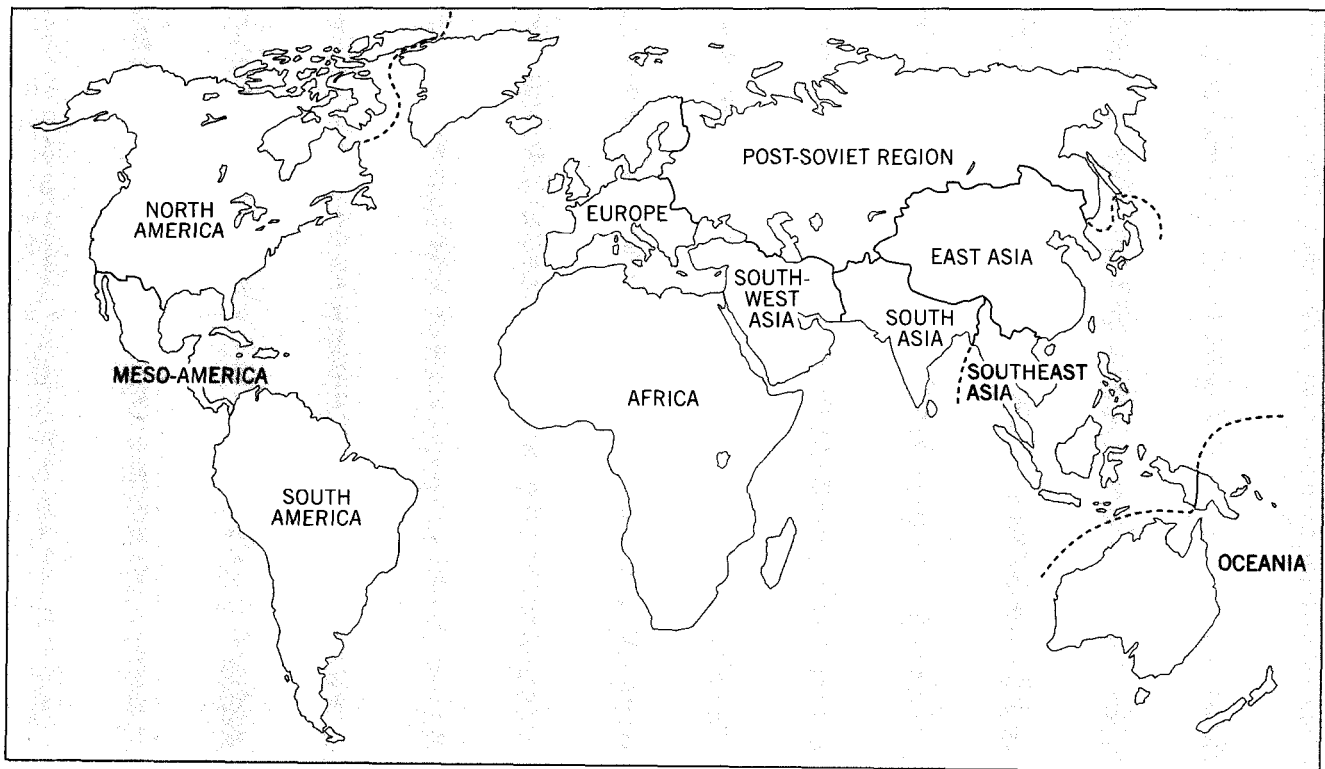
The Third Edition

On the threshold of the new millennium, this third edition of *The Humanistic Tradition* brings increased attention to the theme of global cross-cultural encounter and, in particular, to the interaction of the West with the cultures of Islam, East Asia, and Africa. In this connection, a full chapter has been devoted to the Islamic World, and the chapter on ancient Rome has been expanded to provide parallels between the cultures of the Roman Empire and Han China. Chapter 1 now includes a carefully chosen selection of creation myths. There are new readings from *Beowulf*, Christine de Pisan, Murasaki Shikibu, Ibn Battuta, Hernán Cortés, Jonathan Swift, Mary Shelley, and Alice Walker. Excerpts from the *Iliad* (in chapter 6) appear in the 1990 English translation by Robert Fagles. Sufi poetry, the transatlantic slave trade, Japanese theater, and contemporary computer art add new perspectives to this, the latest version of the text.

The third edition also features two new study aids, both of which are designed to facilitate an appreciation of the arts in relation to their time and place: *Science and Technology Boxes*, which appear throughout the chapters, list key scientific and technological developments that have directly or indirectly affected the history of culture. *Locator Maps* (keyed to the map that appears on p. xii) assist readers in linking specific cultural events with the geographic region in which they occurred. This edition also expands on the number of color illustrations and large color maps, renumbers the Readings by book, and updates the Suggestions for Reading and Selected General Bibliography. Finally, in the transcription of the Chinese language, the older Wade-Giles system has been replaced by the more modern Hanyu Pinyin.

A Note to Instructors

The key to successful classroom use of *The Humanistic Tradition* is *selectivity*. Although students may be assigned to read whole chapters that focus on a topic or theme, as well as complete works that supplement the abridged readings, the classroom should be the stage for a selective treatment of a single example or a set of examples. The organization of this textbook is designed to emphasize themes that cut across geographic boundaries—themes whose universal significance prompts students to evaluate and compare rather than simply memorize and repeat lists of names and places. In an attempt to assist readers in achieving global cultural literacy, every effort has been made to resist isolating (or "ghettoizing") individual cultures and to avoid the inevitable biases we bring to our evaluation of relatively unfamiliar cultures.

Keymap Indicating Areas Shown as White Highlights on the Locator Maps.

Acknowledgments

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SUPPLEMENTS FOR THE INSTRUCTOR AND THE STUDENT

A number of useful supplements are available to instructors and students using *The Humanistic Tradition*. Please contact your sales representative or call 1-800-338-3987 to obtain these resources, or to ask for further details.

Audiocassettes

Two ninety-minute audiocassettes containing a total of forty-five musical selections have been designed exclusively for use with *The Humanistic Tradition*. Cassette One corresponds to the music listening selections discussed in books 1–3 and Cassette Two contains the music in books 4–6. Each selection on the cassettes is discussed in the text and includes a voice introduction for easier location. Instructors may obtain copies of the cassettes for classroom use by calling 1-800-338-3987. Individual cassettes may be purchased separately; however, upon the request of instructors who place book orders, Cassette One or Two can be packaged with any of the six texts, so that students may use the musical examples *along with* the text.

Slide Sets

A set of fifty book-specific slides is available to qualified adopters of *The Humanistic Tradition*. These slides have been especially selected to include many of the less well-known images in the books, and will be a useful complement to your present slide resources. A larger set of two hundred book-specific slides is available for purchase from Sandak, Inc. For more information, contact your McGraw–Hill representative.

Instructor's Resource Manual

The Instructor's Resource Manual is designed to assist instructors as they plan and prepare for classes. Course outlines and sample syllabuses for both semester and quarter systems are included. The chapter summaries emphasize key themes and topics that give focus to the primary source readings. The study questions for each chapter may be removed and copied as handouts for student discussion or written assignments. A Test Item File follows each chapter along with a correlation list that directs instructors to the appropriate music examples, slides, transparencies, and software sections of the other supplements. A list of suggested videotapes, recordings, videodiscs, CD-ROMs, and their suppliers is included.

MicroTest III

The questions in the Test Item File are available on MicroTest III, a powerful but easy-to-use test generating program. MicroTest is available for DOS, Windows, and Macintosh

personal computers. With MicroTest, an instructor can easily select the questions from the Test Item File and print a test and answer key. You can customize questions, headings, and instructions and add or import questions of your own.

Humanities Transparencies

A set of seventy-one acetate transparencies is available with *The Humanistic Tradition*. These show examples of art concepts, architectural styles, art media, maps, musical notation, musical styles, and musical elements.

Culture 3.0 CD-ROM

Culture 3.0 CD-ROM is a unique Macintosh reference tool that emphasizes the interaction of varied disciplines. It contains 40 historical maps, 120 signature melodies, 50,000 hypertext links, and 170 essays on topics ranging from Greek gods and goddesses to the Cold War. Thirty-two CultureGrids are arranged chronologically from the biblical era to the twentieth century, organizing people, places, and events by country, discipline, and generation. (*Culture 2.0* is also available in a seven-disk set for Mac and IBM.)

Student Study Guides, Volumes 1 and 2

Written by Gloria K. Fiero, two new Student Study Guides are now available to help students gain a better understanding of subjects found in *The Humanistic Tradition*. Volume 1 accompanies books 1–3 and Volume 2 accompanies books 4–6. Each chapter contains: a Chapter Objective; a Chapter Outline; Key Terms, Names, and Dates; Vocabulary Building; Multiple Choice Questions; and Essay Questions. Many chapters also contain a Visual/Spatial Exercise and Bonus Material. At the end of each Part, Synthesis material helps students draw together ideas from a set of chapters.

The Art Historian CD-ROM, Volumes 1 and 2

This flexible two-volume series on dual platform (Mac and Windows) CD-ROMs is designed to supplement introductory level art history education. Volume 1 covers ancient and medieval art, and Volume 2 covers Renaissance to modern art. The images included on the CD were gathered from over three hundred museums, galleries, and private collections throughout the world, and the text and test questions were written by current scholars from universities across the United States. With *The Art Historian*, students may listen to multimedia presentations, review full-color high-resolution images, and test their knowledge with flashcards and essay questions. *The Art Historian* is flexible, allowing students to take notes, compare two images on the screen at the same time, and create personalized collections of images for study and review. With *The Art Historian*, we place the power of multimedia *and* art at your fingertips.

	to 1300 C.E.	1350	1400
WORLD EVENTS	Magna Carta 1215; Growth of Parliament in England	Black Death destroys third of European population — Peasant uprisings (*Jacquerie*) — Wat Tyler rebellion	Joan of Arc burned at stake 1431
		Hundred Years' War — Use of foot soldiers, longbow, gunpowder	Hus burned at stake 1415 — Lay brothers and sisters of the common life
		AVIGNON PAPACY	GREAT SCHISM — Council of Pisa — Council of Constance heals schism 1417
	Marco Polo reaches China ca. 1275		ITALIAN RENAISSANCE
			NORTHERN RENAISSANCE
		Ming Dynasty established in China 1368	
		MALI EMPIRE (West Africa)	Portugal in Africa (Kongo) from 1430
		BENIN (Niger)	Atlantic slave trade begins
	Decline of Maya civilization	AZTEC EMPIRE (Mexico)	
			INKA EMPIRE (Peru)
LITERATURE AND PHILOSOPHY	Marguerite of Porete writes descriptions of divine love — Mystical and devotional literature: Eckhart, Suso, St. Bridget, Julian of Norwich	Petrarch: *Canzoniere*; letters — Boccaccio: *Decameron*	Chaucer: *Canterbury Tales* — Villon: ballades
			Christine de Pisan: *Book of the City of Ladies*
	Africa: *griots* — Mali epics: *Sundiata* — African myths, proverbs, tales, poems (oral tradition)	Ibn Battuta: *Book of Travels*	
VISUAL ARTS AND ARCHITECTURE	Cimabue: *Madonna Enthroned*	Traini: *Triumph of Death*	First use of oil paint — Linear perspective — Aerial perspective
	Giotto: Arena Chapel, Padua	Limbourgs: *Très Riches Heures* — *Danse macabre* woodcuts	van Eyck: *Arnolfini Marriage*
	Martini: *Annunciation*		
	Pucelle: Prayerbook for Jeanne d'Evreux	Sluter: *Well of Moses*	Masaccio: *The Tribute Money*; *Trinity* — Donatello: *David* — Ghiberti: "Gates of Paradise" — Brunelleschi: Dome of Florence Cathedral; Pazzi Chapel
	Benin bronzes: *Oba* of Benin — Cliff Palace, Colorado	African headpieces, masks, and fetishes — Aztec architecture: Tenochtitlán sculpture	
MUSIC AND DANCE	*Ars nova*	Landini	Clavichord
	Isorhythm — *Caccia* — Rounds: "Sumer is icumen in"	Machaut: *Messe de Notre Dame* — polyphonic ballades	Harpsichord
	African chant, music, and dance		Aztec/Inka sun dance — Native American chant

Vesalius: *Anatomy*
Copernicus: *On the Revolution of the Heavenly Spheres*

devotio moderna

Gutenberg: printing press perfected 1450

Global exploration: Columbus reaches America 1492 da Gama, Magellan

European witch-hunts

Pope Leo X
Luther posts *Ninety-Five Theses*

Globe Theatre, London

Spanish Armada defeated 1588

THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION

Henry VIII breaks with Roman Catholic Church
Calvin in Geneva
Zwingli: Anabaptists

Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor

HIGH RENAISSANCE

Medici rule Florence
Fall of Constantinople to the Turks 1453
Platonic Academy founded in Florence

Patronage: Pope Julius II commissions Raphael, Michelangelo, and Bramante

First Spanish colony in Florida 1565

Benin civilization at its peak

Cortés in Mexico 1519

Jesuits in "New Spain"

Portuguese in India and Brazil

Tokugawa Shogunate in Japan 1603

Pizarro conquers Peru 1531

Ficino: Neoplatonism
Pico: *Oration on the Dignity of Man*

Alberti: *On the Family*

Thomas à Kempis: *Imitatio Christi*

Native America: myths, tales, poems (oral tradition)

Castiglione: *The Book of the Courtier*

Machiavelli: *The Prince*

Erasmus: *The Praise of Folly*
More: *Utopia*

Cortés: Letters from Mexico

Rabelais: *Gargantua and Pantagruel*

Luther: *Address to the German Nobility*

Vasari: *Lives of the Artists*

Maya: *Popol Vuh* (excerpt in chapter 1)

Cervantes: *Don Quijote*

Montaigne: *Essays*

Shakespeare: *Othello*; sonnets and other plays

Benzoni: *History of the New World*

Alberti: *Ten Books on Architecture*; Santa Maria Novella

Verrocchio: *Colleoni*

Aztec "Calendar Stone"

Pollaiuolo: *Hercules and Antaeus*
Botticelli: *Birth of Venus*

Laurana: *Battista Sforza* Studiolo at Urbino

Raphael: *Alba Madonna*; *School of Athens*

Bellini: *Procession in Piazza San Marco*

Leonardo: notebooks; *Mona Lisa*; *Last Supper*

Bramante: Tempietto

Dürer: landscapes, portraits, printmaking
Bosch: *Garden of Earthly Delights*
Grünewald: Isenheim Altarpiece

Titian: *Pastoral Concert*; *Venus of Urbino*

Cranach
Holbein: *Erasmus*

Baldung ("Grien"): *Witches*

Michelangelo: *David*; *Sistine Chapel* ceiling; dome of St. Peter's

Brueghel: *Triumph of Death*: *Wedding Dance*

Palladio: *Four Books on Architecture*, Villa Rotonda

Dufay: *chansons*; *Missa L'homme armé*

Ebreo: *Art of Dance*; *balli* (ballet)

Italian court dances: *basse danse, saltarello, piva*

Printed music

Josquin des Prez: masses, motets

Word painting
Imitation

Lutheran chorales: "A Mighty Fortress is Our God"

Renaissance madrigals:
Lassus: "Matona, mia cara"
Dowland
Morley: "My bonny lass she smileth"

Town pageants, festival displays, theatrical dance

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PART

I

THE AGE OF THE RENAISSANCE

The three hundred years between 1300 and 1600 brought Western Europe out of the Middle Ages and onto the threshold of modernity. In economic life, manorialism succumbed to entrepreneurial capitalism. In political life, feudalism gave way to centralized forms of government and the advent of national states. Ascendant individualism, secularism, and rationalism challenged devotional sentiment and religious fervor. The printing press made liberal education available to an increasingly literate population, while the science of navigation and advancing technology encouraged European expansion and cross-cultural contacts. By 1600, Europe would assume a dominant presence in parts of the world whose geography had only recently been mapped with any accuracy.

The Renaissance, or "rebirth" of classicism, was the cultural hinge between medieval and modern times. Originating in fourteenth-century Italy, and spreading northward during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, this dynamic movement shaped some of the West's most fundamental political, economic, and cultural values—values associated with the rise of nation-states, the formation of the middle class, and the advancement of classically based education and classically inspired art.

The first three chapters of this unit are devoted to an examination of the age of the Renaissance. Chapter 15, "Adversity and Challenge: The Fourteenth-Century Transition," treats the century of change that ushered in the Renaissance. During this time, the struggle for survival against the devastating bubonic plague, the trials of a long and debilitating war between England and

France, and the series of events leading to the decline of the Roman Catholic Church radically altered all aspects of Western European life and cultural expression. In the writings of Boccaccio, Chaucer, and Christine de Pisan, in the paintings of Giotto, and in the *ars nova* of music, there are distinct signs of a revived self-consciousness, increasing fidelity to nature, and a growing preoccupation with gender and class.

Chapter 16, "Classical Humanism in the Age of the Renaissance," examines evidence of the cultural revival that motivated the finest literature and art of this era. Classical humanism—the movement to recover, study, and disseminate ancient Greek and Latin texts—stimulated in Italy, the birthplace of the Renaissance, a sense of individualism, a boundless vitality, and an optimistic view of the human potential for fulfillment on earth. The writings of Petrarch, Alberti, Pico, Castiglione, and Machiavelli are viewed as evidence of the Renaissance effort to apply classical precepts to matters of education, diplomacy, politics, and social life.

Chapter 17, "Renaissance Artists: Disciples of Nature, Masters of Invention," charts the visual arts and music of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Renaissance artists sought new ways of representing the physical world with greater accuracy. They looked to classical Greece and Rome as sources of aesthetic authority, but competed with their classical predecessors in the search for unity of design and heroic individualism. In this chapter, we meet many of the giants of Renaissance art and architecture, including Donatello, Brunelleschi, Masaccio, Leonardo, Raphael, and Michelangelo. The chapter also surveys the high points of Renaissance music and dance, including the development of the madrigal, the rise of instrumental music, and the beginnings of choreography.

15

Adversity and Challenge: The Fourteenth-Century Transition

Traditions normally undergo modification only over long periods of time. However, natural disasters, epidemic disease, and protracted warfare generally accelerate cultural change. The fourteenth century provides a case in point, for during that dramatic time all of these catalytic phenomena occurred in Western Europe, causing widespread havoc and wrenching medieval customs and practices out of their steady, dependable rhythms. As a result, the period between roughly 1300 and 1400 became a time of transition between medieval and early modern history. During this age, many medieval traditions were revised or discarded and new cultural patterns contributed to the formation of a modern world system dominated by the rise of the West.

The Black Death

The most devastating natural catastrophe of the early modern era was the bubonic plague, which struck Europe in 1347 and destroyed one third to one half of its population within less than a century. Originating in Asia and spread by the Mongol tribes that dominated that vast area, the disease devastated China and the Middle East, interrupting long-distance trade and cross-cultural encounters that had flourished for two centuries. The plague was carried into Europe by flea-bearing black rats infesting the commercial vessels that brought goods to Mediterranean ports. Within two years of its arrival it ravaged much of the Western world. In its early stages, it was transmitted by the bite of either the infected flea or the host rat; in its more severe stages, it was passed on by those infected with the disease. The symptoms of the malady were terrifying: Buboes (or abscesses) that began in the lymph glands of the groin or armpits of the afflicted slowly filled with pus, turning the body a deathly black, hence the popular label "the Black Death." Once the boils and accompanying fever appeared, death usually followed within two to three days. Traditional treatments, such as the bleeding of victims and fumigation with vapors of vinegar, proved useless. No connection was perceived between the ubiquitous rats and the plague itself, and in the absence of a clinical understanding of bacterial infection, the medical profession of the day was helpless. (Indeed, the bacillus of the bubonic plague was not isolated until 1894.)

The plague hit hardest in the towns, where a concentration of population and the lack of sanitation made the disease all the more difficult to contain. Four waves of bubonic plague spread throughout Europe between 1347 and 1375, infecting some European cities several times and nearly wiping out their entire populations (Figure 15.1). The virulence of the plague and the mood of mounting despair horrified the Florentine writer Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–1375). In his preface to the *Decameron*, a collection of tales told by ten young people who abandoned plague-ridden Florence for the safety of a country estate, Boccaccio described the physical conditions of the pestilence, as well as its psychological consequences. He recorded with somber precision how widespread death had forced Florentine citizens to abandon the traditional forms of grieving and the rituals associated with death and burial. The stirring vernacular prose captured the mood of dread that prevailed in Florence, as people fled their cities, homes, and even their families.

READING 3.1

From Boccaccio's Introduction to the *Decameron*

. . . In the year of Our Lord 1348 the deadly plague broke out in the great city of Florence, most beautiful of Italian cities. Whether through the operation of the heavenly bodies or because of our own iniquities which the just wrath of God sought to correct, the plague had arisen in the East some years before, causing the death of countless human beings. It spread without stop from one place to another, until, unfortunately, it swept over the West. Neither knowledge nor human foresight availed against it, though the city was cleansed of much filth by   10