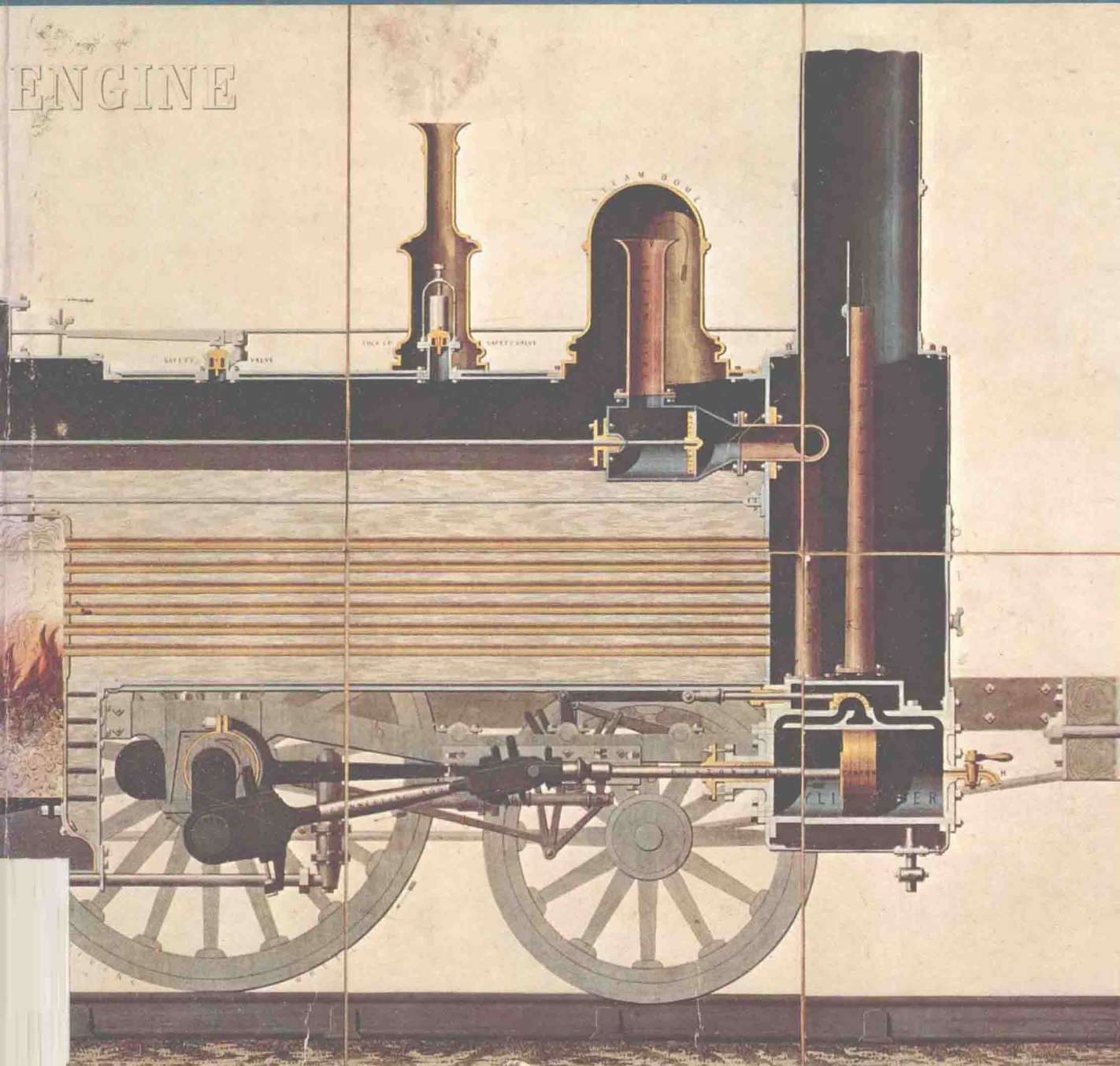


# The Mainstream of Civilization

Second Edition

## Since 1500

JOSEPH R. STRAYER / HANS W. GATZKE / E. HARRIS HARBISON



JOSEPH R. STRAYER  
*Princeton University*

HANS W. GATZKE  
*Yale University*

E. HARRIS HARBISON  
*Late of Princeton University*

# of Civilization

# Since 1500



Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc.

*New York / Chicago / San Francisco / Atlanta*

# The Mainstream of Civilization Since 1500

Second Edition

**Cover:** sectional view of a locomotive engine, 1848; color engraving by John Emslie. From the collection of the late Sir Arthur Elton, Bt.

Maps by J. P. Tremblay

---

© 1969, 1971, 1974 by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

ISBN: 0-15-551561-6

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 73-19410

Printed in the United States of America

---

*Pages 834-36 in the back of the book listing the photo credits constitute a continuation of the copyright page.*

# 16 The Revival of Europe

**D**uring the course of the fourteenth century economic depression, plague, and war had weakened western Europe. Secular rulers, who in 1300 had seemed close to establishing absolute monarchies, had lost much of their power over the privileged classes and thus much of their ability to main-

tain law and order. The prestige of the Church had declined during the Babylonian Captivity and the Great Schism. Most men believed in monarchy as the best form of government; almost all believed in the Church as the only source of salvation. But with both these traditional authorities functioning badly,



there seemed to be little hope for religious reform or a revival of security and prosperity. Everyone desired peace, a healing of the schism in the Church, better government, and increased production and trade. But there was little agreement on where to begin, and none of the many projects for reform was very successful.

By the end of the fifteenth century, a startling change had taken place. The economic depression had ended; new industries at home and new trade routes overseas had opened up new opportunities and created new wealth. Kings and princes had clearly gained the upper hand over the privileged classes, especially in France, Spain, and England. The papal schism was ended, and Rome was once more the capital of Western Christendom. New forms of learning based on

an intensive study of the classics were competing with or modifying older studies. New forms of art were challenging the late Gothic style. Most important, there was a note of optimism and confidence, of excitement and enjoyment. There was talk of a "new age" dawning, a "dark age" past, a rebirth of the best qualities of classical civilization. By 1500 the basic characteristics of our "modern" world were becoming visible: its dynamic economy and fluid society, its sovereign nation-states and international anarchy, its secular ideals, and its intellectual and moral values.

We can now see that the political and economic revival of Europe was led by the North, while intellectual, literary, and artistic innovations were largely the work of Italy. But this sharing of responsibilities was less obvious in the fifteenth century than it was later, and in the transition from the medieval to the modern world the Italians had the great advantage of being the first to realize that a transition was taking place. They were the ones who talked of a new age, of a break with the barbarous past; they were the ones who believed that a new civilization could be created that would be a worthy heir of Greece and Rome. As a result, in the two centuries between the death of Dante (1321) and the sack of Rome by mutinous imperial troops (1527), Italy exerted increasing influence over the rest of Europe. Italians set the style in architecture, sculpture, and painting; they dictated the literary taste that Europe was to follow for generations. By combining the old ideal of the chivalric, courtly knight with their own interest in learning, they developed a genuinely new social ideal, that of "the gentleman," and the educational ideal of a "liberal education." Italy was the school of Europe. Northerners flocked there by the thousands, and Italians, in turn, appeared in every northern court, even in remote Muscovy.

There were several reasons for Italy's leadership in the change from medieval to early modern ways of life. Italy had always been somewhat different from the rest of Europe during the Middle Ages. It was never completely feudalized, and it early rejected most feudal institutions.

The three states of human society: the beggar, the artisan, and the lord. Late fifteenth-century miniatures by Jean Bourdichon.



A Renaissance prince and his wife: Giovanni Bentivoglio, lord of Bologna, and Ginevra Bentivoglio. From paintings by Ercole Roberti, ca. 1480.



It rejected a unified monarchy under the German emperor even more decisively. Scholasticism never dominated Italian thinking, nor did the Gothic style ever dominate Italian art. Since the medieval tradition in Italy was weak, it could easily be rejected. Moreover the Italian cities had great wealth, large populations, and complete independence. When they tried new experiments in art, literature, and politics, they became powerful instruments of social change.

### THE CITY-STATES OF NORTHERN ITALY

The northern Italian cities were dominated by international trade. A third of the population of Florence lived by importing wool from agricultural countries and selling finished cloth all over Europe

and the Levant. Almost all the population of Venice depended directly or indirectly on trade in Oriental goods such as silk and spices. In such communities, capitalists—the banker, the export merchant, the large-scale manufacturer—were the most important figures.

The Italian towns controlled the countryside around them as northern European towns did not. They had broken the power of the landed nobility and had absorbed the defeated class into their own communities. Peasant villages and small market-towns had been annexed by large urban centers. Thus city-states were created—that is, a strong city government controlled not only its own immediate area but hundreds of square miles of rural territory.

Class divisions were sharp in these city-states. At the top were the wealthy merchants and bankers—the *popolo grasso*, or “fat people,” as they were called. Beneath them were the lesser bourgeoisie, the *popolo minuto*, or “little people”—craftsmen, shopkeepers, and petty businessmen. And beneath them was a growing proletariat of workers. Outside the town walls were the peasants, who had no political influence and little hope of improving their condition. Conflict was constant between the *popolo grasso* and the *popolo minuto*, and occasionally the workers themselves rose in brief, short-lived rebellions, as they did in Florence in 1378. Generally an oligarchy representing the big business interests managed to maintain political control. But the oligarchs did not always agree among themselves, nor did they always preserve internal security or financial stability. During the fourteenth century, quarrels among oligarchs and conflicts between classes became so frequent and so disturbing that town after town accepted the leadership of a strong man and gave him absolute power to restore law and order. These men set up military dictatorships and held on to their power through a combination of ruthlessness and shrewdness. They shed the blood of political opponents without hesitation or scruple, but they were generally careful to improve the city’s public utilities, strengthen its defenses, devise an efficient system of taxation, provide





police protection, and above all, foster business. Thus the rise of big business led to irreconcilable personal and class struggles, and these in turn to "the age of the despots."

#### *War and Diplomacy*

Oligarchs and despots, realizing that the merchants and shopkeepers disliked military service, replaced citizen militias with mercenary troops called *condottieri*. These troops were not very reliable; they were loyal to their generals rather than to their employers. The generals sought to preserve their military assets by winning wars through clever maneuvers and negotiations rather than by pitched battles. But while they did not fight very much, they did have a monopoly of military power and some generals displaced weak despots or divided city governments, and became despots themselves.

What distinguished northern Italy most sharply from the rest of Europe was the total independence of its city-states from any central government. From Venice, oldest and proudest of the city-

states, on down to towns of a few thousand inhabitants, city governments acted as if they were subject to no superior power. Motivated by economic and political self-interest, each city-state engaged in endless wars, making and breaking alliances, and jealously watching the most powerful state of the moment to make sure that it did not become strong enough to conquer the peninsula. Early in the fifteenth century the Italian city-states began to maintain resident ambassadors at the courts of foreign states to keep rulers in constant touch with governments that might one day become either useful allies or dangerous enemies. At about the same time a kind of "balance of power" began to operate among the five leading states in Italy—Venice, Milan, Florence, the Papal States, and the Kingdom of Naples—in response to an unwritten understanding that no one of the five must be allowed to gain enough power to threaten the others. When France and Spain intervened in Italy at the close of the fifteenth century, both these practices—the basic machinery of modern diplomacy and the bal-

ancing of power among a group of sovereign states—spread to the larger stage of Europe. By the mid-sixteenth century, resident ambassadors were common throughout central and western Europe, and a rough balance of power had been established between the ruling dynasties of the two most powerful states, France and Spain.

### *Milan, Venice, and Florence*

Behind these generalizations lie the striking variety and individuality of the Italian cities of this era. Milan, the largest city of the Po Valley, was perhaps the most typical. It submitted early to a despot and about 1400 a Milanese ruler, Gian Galeazzo Visconti, came as close as any strong man of the time to eliminating his rivals and uniting northern Italy. He failed, but the fear he inspired persisted, and no other despot managed to come so close to dominating northern Italy.

Venice, the greatest commercial power of the peninsula, was absorbed in its widespread Mediterranean interests and was relatively isolated from Italian politics until it began to acquire territory on the mainland in the later fifteenth century. Its republican constitution was the oldest and its government the most stable in Italy. There was no despot in Venice—the doge, or duke, was a figurehead—but a tight-knit commercial aristocracy ran the city through a small and tough-minded executive committee, the Council of Ten. Perhaps because the energies of the whole population were so absorbed in commerce, there were no real revolutions and few conspiracies in Venetian history. The constitution of the “most serene republic” (the official title of Venice) stood as a model of republican stability to other Italians.

Florence, like Venice, was proud of being a republic among the welter of despotisms and was especially proud of having helped to frustrate Gian Galeazzo Visconti’s attempt to snuff out republican liberties in Italy. But in every other respect Florence and Venice were unlike. Venice lived primarily by commerce; Florence primarily by banking and industry. The most astute bankers and the finest textiles in Europe were both to be

found in Florence. The energies of Venetians were directed outward toward the sea; the energies of Florentines were focused on industry and politics within the city walls. Venetian society and Venetian government exhibited a high degree of stability, whereas nothing seemed stable in Florence. Revolution seemed to be the chief outdoor sport and constitution-making the chief indoor sport.

During the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries the Florentines tried everything from dictatorship to radical democracy; they compromised on oligarchy and finally ended with boss rule. In 1434 a new-rich party within the oligarchy, led by one of the city’s wealthiest and shrewdest bankers, Cosimo de’ Medici, gained power. For almost sixty years Cosimo and his grandson, Lorenzo the Magnificent (d. 1492), ran the city by manipulating elections and tinkering with the republican constitution. Cosimo was a banker who had been forced to play politics in order to save his financial interests. Lorenzo was more of a politician, only incidentally concerned with the family banking business. But each devoted his energy, his money, and his taste to the job of protecting, expanding, and beautifying the city. The most glittering example of Italy’s golden age was Florence under the Medici.

## ITALIAN URBAN CIVILIZATION

In these busy, crowded cities of northern Italy a new sort of society and a new set of social ideals grew up, quite unlike feudal society and chivalric ideals. The handicaps of low birth and inferior status could be overcome fairly easily. The chivalric virtues of loyalty and honor seemed irrelevant. Here were urban communities built on advanced industrial methods and division of labor, and dependent on the continental market for their economic existence. Competition was keen at every level, from managing a shop or fashioning an altar piece to serving as banker to the pope or running a city government. Careers were open to talent everywhere, and talent, education, and determination counted as much as high birth or ownership of land. The



The rise of the Medici: Cosimo de’ Medici has the look of the wily businessman, while his grandson Lorenzo appears every inch the prince. Above: Cosimo, detail from a fresco by Gozzoli. Below: Lorenzo, by an unknown artist.





man who ended his life as a famous painter, a widely read author, a wealthy banker, or an infamous despot may well have begun life as a poor peasant or a simple artisan. Self-reliance, rational calculation, ingenuity in adapting means to ends, imagination, and boldness—these were the qualities that carried men to the top. And there was always room at the top for creative and brilliant minds, if they had also the will to achieve fame. All these qualities were summed up in a word often on the lips of artists, writers, and statesmen: *virtù*. This was the quality that made a man a true man (Latin: *vir*). It did not mean “virtue” in the modern sense, but rather “virtuosity,” that combination of genius, determination, and, when necessary, lack of scruples, that made for greatness in artistic creation, statesmanship, or big business.

### *Individualism*

The first mark of this society, at its upper levels at least, was individualism. Few of the old authorities carried the weight they once had carried for the typical Italian city-dweller. He owed no allegiance to a feudal lord. His guild could not regulate his business practices so closely as it might have done two centuries earlier. The city government demanded strict obedience, it is true, but he had some say in how this government was run and could lay down limits that not even a despot could overstep without facing trouble. He recognized no worldly power of king or emperor or pope within the boundaries of his city-state. And although the city-dweller professed himself a good Christian and a hater of heresy, he generally despised the clergy and tended to accept their authority only when it was backed by strong ecclesiastical sanctions.

Thus in the fifteenth century there was a new emphasis on man as a private person, mainly concerned with himself, his family, his friends, and his own self-development. Such individualism sometimes went to extremes, as it did in the case of Benvenuto Cellini (1500–71), a sculptor who described his violent and colorful career in a famous *Autobiography*.

Cellini assumed that the ordinary laws of morality were made for ordinary people and that they neither could nor should be enforced in the case of geniuses like himself. He also assumed that autobiography, a literary form that had been very rare in the Middle Ages, was a natural form of expression and one that would find eager readers. He begins his book: “All men of whatsoever quality they be, who have done anything of excellence, . . . ought to describe their life with their own hand.” Later he remarks, “I make no profession of writing history. It is enough for me to occupy myself with my own affairs.” Cellini was obviously interesting to himself, and he was sure he was interesting to others.

### *Secularism*

The second mark of this new society was its predominantly secular tone. This does not mean that it was pagan or anti-Christian. It means that the things of this world increasingly occupied the time and attention of the Italian townspeople—the

## *A Man of Virtù*

Benvenuto Cellini, a Florentine goldsmith and sculptor, had struck medals and coins for Pope Clement VII (1523–34). He claimed that he had been insulted by a jeweler named Pompeo (who also worked for the Pope) and after several quarrels, Cellini stabbed Pompeo to death in a street brawl. Clement VII had just died; Cardinal Farnese was elected Pope on 13 October 1534 and took the name of Paul III.

After he had put affairs of greater consequence in order, the new Pope sent for me, saying that he did not wish any one else to strike his coins. To these words of his Holiness one of his gentlemen named Latino Juvinale [a Humanist] answered that I [Cellini] was in hiding for the murder of Pompeo of Milan, and set forth what could be argued for my justification in the most favorable terms. The Pope replied: “I know nothing of Pompeo’s death but plenty of Benvenuto’s provocation, so let a safe-conduct be at once made out for him.” A great friend of Pompeo’s was there; he was a Milanese called Ambrogio [Ambrogio Recalcati, a papal secretary]. This man said: “In the first days of your papacy it is not well to grant pardons of this kind.” The Pope answered: “You know less about such matters than I do. Know then that men like Benvenuto, unique in their profession, stand above the law.”

From *The Life of Benvenuto Cellini*, trans. by John Addington Symonds (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1926), p. 144.



Minters making silver thalers (from which comes our word *dollar*). A heated metal disk has been placed on top of the die, another die has been placed on top of the disk, and the minter is striking the top die with an iron mallet. Detail from a painting by Hans Hesse, Church of St. Anne, Annaberg, Saxony.

balance of profit and loss, well-built houses and fine clothes, rich food and drink, the enjoyment of leisure—and that the ascetic and otherworldly ideals of the medieval Church seemed more and more remote to them. Their tastes and attitudes are evident in the ribald stories of Boccaccio's popular *Decameron* (ca. 1350). The heroes and heroines are not exactly irreligious or critical of Christian ideals, but they despise the hypocrisy of priests and monks, and they rejoice in the triumph of clever people of the world over clerical busybodies.

The secularism of Italian society can thus be broken down into two components: preoccupation with worldly pursuits, and contempt for those who professed the ascetic ideal but did not live up to it. There were a few pagans or atheists. But most men simply thought more constantly of this world than of the

next, without denying the ultimate importance of the next. There was a latent conflict between the older and the new ideals. This conflict troubled many writers and artists and led to outbreaks of revivalism in the most worldly cities, such as Florence. In fact, tension between worldly and otherworldly ideals was more typical of the period than was the frank and untroubled enjoyment of temporal pleasures.

### Humanism

The third mark of Italian urban society was its enthusiasm for classical antiquity. This enthusiasm came to be called Humanism—from the Latin *humanitas*, as used by Cicero to describe the literary culture proper to a well-bred man. The Middle Ages had always lived in the shadow of Rome, and interest in classical literature was nothing new. John of Salisbury in the twelfth century had a first-rate knowledge of Latin literature, and the greatest medieval poet, Dante, made it his conscious concern to blend the best of both classical and Christian ideals throughout the *Divine Comedy*. However, Francesco Petrarca, or Petrarch (1304–74), is rightly called the father of a new Humanism. His enthusiasm for Cicero, his admiration for Rome (he said he wished he had been born in the ancient world instead of his own), and his feel for the style of classical Latin were contagious. He loved the classics for their own sake, not because they could be used to explain the language of the early Church Fathers. Within a generation or two after his death Petrarch's followers were busily discovering classical manuscripts in monastic libraries, writing letters to one another in impeccable Ciceronian Latin, pouring contempt on the Latin style of medieval scholastic philosophers, and, most important, getting jobs as secretaries at the papal Curia and the courts of the despots, or as teachers of the children of the ruling classes in the cities.

These professional Humanists were something new in European society. Generally they were laymen who made a living by their learning, not clerics or monks devoting spare time to classical

study. They were self-made men who were peddling a new type of scholarship to their contemporaries—and who found the market very good. Enthusiasm for the classics was heightened after 1395, when refugee scholars from the Byzantine Empire began to teach Greek to eager students in Florence and elsewhere. And by the end of the fifteenth century a few Italians were even beginning to learn Hebrew and Arabic. Humanism was both a scholarly movement and a social fad. The Humanists revived the study of classical Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, and they got the ruling classes of the Italian cities excited about what they were doing.

The Humanists initiated a revolution in educational theory and practice. Formal education in the Middle Ages had been dominated by the clergy and directed mainly to the production of clerics. The nobility had their own program of training knights to hunt and fight and behave properly at court. But neither of these systems of education offered much to the sons of business and professional town-dwellers, and by the thirteenth century, if not earlier, there were town schools, primarily for laymen, that taught arithmetic and Latin grammar. The Humanists of the fifteenth century rediscovered what Greco-Roman writers had meant by the “liberal arts”: the liberating effect on mind and imagination of the study of great literature and philosophy. To this they added the chivalric emphasis on outdoor activity and athletic skill and so formed a new pattern of education. The result was a program designed to produce well-rounded and well-read laymen, able to write classical Latin and perhaps Greek, well mannered and at home in polite society, physically strong and well groomed, skillful in the art of war. “We call those studies liberal,” wrote one Humanist educator, “which are worthy of a free man . . . that education which calls forth, trains, and develops those highest gifts of body and of mind which ennoble men.” In practice this education too often degenerated into a narrowly literary training, floundering in the grammatical details of dead languages. It was available only to a few and it was consciously aristocratic in its



Young student reading Cicero;  
detail from a painting by  
Vincenzo Foppa.

ideals. But at its best it passed on to later generations, including our own, the goal of turning out well-balanced human beings, devoted to both classical and Christian ideals, and able to become better businessmen or lawyers or statesmen because of their liberal education.

### *Petrarch on the Classics and Christianity*

You are well aware that from early boyhood of all the writers of all ages and races the one whom I most admire and love is Cicero. You agree with me in this respect as well as in so many others. I am not afraid of being considered a poor Christian by declaring myself so much a Ciceronian. [This is an allusion to a famous vision of St. Jerome in which God told him: “You are a Ciceronian and therefore not a Christian.”] To my knowledge, Cicero never wrote one word that would conflict with the principles proclaimed by Christ. If, perchance, his works contained anything contrary to Christ’s doctrine, that one fact would be sufficient to destroy my belief in Cicero and in Aristotle and in Plato. . . .

Christ is my God; Cicero is the prince of the language I use. I grant you that these ideas are widely separated, but I deny that they are in conflict with each other. Christ is the Word, and the Virtue and the Wisdom of God the Father. Cicero has written much on the speech of men, on the virtues of men, and on the wisdom of men—statements that are true and therefore surely acceptable to the God of Truth.

Letter to Neri Morando, 1358, trans. by M. E. Cosenza, *Petrarch’s Letters to Classical Authors* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1910), pp. 18–19.

## Historical Self-Consciousness

The fourth and final mark of this urban society was its historical self-consciousness. The historical sense of the Middle Ages was not highly developed. The crucial events of the Christian drama had already happened, and time now had only to run on and out to its conclusion in the Last Judgment. Caesar and Charlemagne wore the same costume in medieval drawings. Frederick Barbarossa thought it perfectly reasonable to insert his own edicts in the *Corpus Juris* of Justinian. There had been no essential change since the triumph of Christianity. There was no significant difference between Constantine and Otto III, or between St. Peter and Innocent III. The passage of time brought only minor variations in a persisting pattern.

Petrarch and his Humanist successors in the fifteenth century revolutionized this conception of the past. They became more interested in this world and its history. Their enthusiasm for classical antiquity enabled them for the first time to see the ancient world as a civilization that had run its course. It had been born, it had flourished, and it had died. They talked of the "Fall of Rome" and of a "Dark Age" that had followed. Above all, they talked of a "rebirth," or "revival," that was beginning in their own age. Rome had had its Golden Age and had fallen; darkness had succeeded, but now the light was beginning to dawn once more. The Humanists and their followers were highly conscious of their position in history and of their historical mission.

## THE "RENAISSANCE"

While the Italian Humanists were sure that they lived in an age of rebirth, they were not nearly so sure of the profound implications of their work as were later historians. Chief of these was the Swiss Jacob Burckhardt, who wrote a brilliant book called *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860). Thanks to Burckhardt, western historians accepted the idea that there was a "Renaissance," or rebirth, after the Middle Ages, that it marked a sharp break with medieval

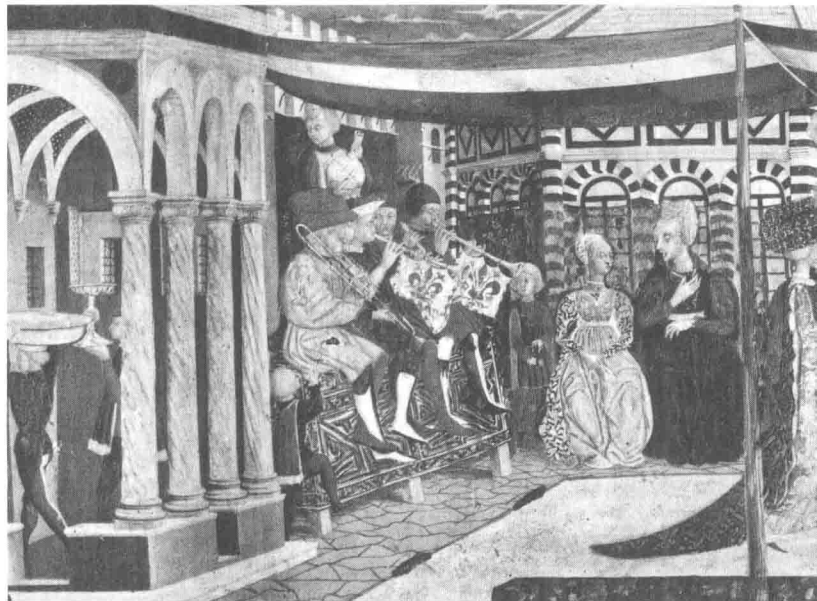
ideals and practices, and that it was centered in Italy. There was much truth in Burckhardt's thesis, but he exaggerated both the sharpness of the breach with the medieval past and the uniqueness of Italy compared to the rest of Europe.

The term "Renaissance" is most useful when it is applied to the revolutionary change in the arts, in literature, and in the concept of man that took place in Italy in the fourteenth, fifteenth, and early sixteenth centuries. It is less useful when applied to political and ecclesiastical history because it is hard to say what "rebirth" means in these areas. And it is quite useless when applied to economic and social history, in which changes are always slow and in which the important developments began as far back as the eleventh century. Historians of art and literature are relatively sure of what "Renaissance" means; other historians are unsure in varying degrees to the point of total doubt. This does not mean that artistic and literary developments had no connection with economic and social change. It means simply that the word "Renaissance" is best used to describe the changes in artistic and literary taste and skill that occurred at the close of the Middle Ages.

### *Literature, Philosophy, and Scholarship*

Wherever there were classical models to fall back on, the tendency at first was

"The Adimari Wedding," by an anonymous painter, mid-fifteenth century. The painting shows the parade of guests at the wedding reception, held under a canopy outside the church in Florence. Such paintings often adorned the bride's *cassone*, a wedding chest designed to hold her trousseau.





for both writers and artists to lose themselves in simple imitation, in the first flush of excited rediscovery. It was easy, for instance, for Humanists to imitate the letter writing, the orations, the moral essays, and even the poetry of the Romans—and they did, relentlessly, in the early fifteenth century. When it became possible for educated Florentines to read Plato in the original Greek, the Medici fostered an informal group of scholars who became known as the Platonic Academy. Their leading members, Marsilio Ficino (1433–99) and Pico della Mirandola (1463–94), tried to reconcile Platonism and Christianity, as Thomas Aquinas had tried to reconcile Aristotelianism and Christianity. It was the one serious attempt at philosophical synthesis during the Renaissance, and it was a failure. But enthusiasm for Plato and Platonism was infectious and had widespread influence on poets and painters throughout Europe in the next century. In fact, Plato dominated the imagination of the Renaissance as Aristotle had earlier dominated the thought of medieval scholars.

All was not mere imitation in Italian thought and writing, however. Modern critical scholarship, in the sense of careful linguistic and historical analysis of the literary remains of the past, dates from the Renaissance, and particularly from one of the keenest minds of the age, Lorenzo Valla (ca. 1405–57). Valla analyzed the language and the historical

background of the so-called Donation of Constantine, one of the main bulwarks of the popes' claims to temporal power, and proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that the document was a clumsy forgery of the Dark Ages. He further compared several Greek manuscripts of the New Testament with the accepted Latin translation, the Vulgate, and showed that the translation was full of errors and distortions. The critical spirit and scholarly technique that he inaugurated influenced Erasmus, Pierre Bayle, and Voltaire and resulted in the "scientific" scholarship of the nineteenth century.

### *Social and Political Thought*

Much of Renaissance thought about the relation of man to man simply paraphrased the ethics and political theories of the Greeks and Romans. But sometimes a man wrote freshly from his own experience and spoke directly to the members of his own society. For example, Leon Battista Alberti (1404–72) in his book *On the Family*, described the interests and ideals of the Florentine families he knew: prudence and thrift, strong family feeling and little concern for larger causes outside, appreciation of comfort, planning and foresight, and pride in owning a house in the city and an estate in the country to produce all the family's food. It is one of the earliest idealized portraits of what will later be called the bourgeois virtues.







A late sixteenth-century portrait of Niccolò Machiavelli by Santi di Tito. The artist has tried to suggest both the intellectual brilliance and the shrewdness of the man.

## *Machiavelli on Cruelty and Clemency*

Is it better to be loved than feared or feared than loved? It may be answered that one should wish to be both, but it is much safer to be feared than loved when one of the two must be chosen. Men on the whole are ungrateful, fickle, false, cowards, covetous. As long as you succeed, they are yours entirely. They will offer you their blood, property, life, and children when the need is distant, but when it approaches they turn against you. And a prince who, relying entirely on their promises, has neglected other precautions, is ruined. . . . Men have fewer scruples in offending one who is beloved than one who is feared, for love is preserved by the link of obligation which, owing to the baseness of men, is broken at every opportunity for their advantage, but fear preserves you by a dread of punishment which never fails.

Nevertheless, a prince should inspire fear in such a way that if he does not win love, he avoids hatred; because he can endure very well being feared while he is not hated, and this will be true as long as he abstains from taking the property of his subjects or their women. But when it is necessary for him to take the life of someone, he must do it with proper justification and for manifest cause, and above everything he must keep his hands off the property of others, because men more quickly forget the death of their father than the loss of their heritage.

From *The Prince*, trans. W. K. Marriott (London: J. M. Dent, n.d.), pp. 134–35.

A social stratum just above that described by Alberti is sketched in Baldassare Castiglione's (1478–1529) *The Courtier*, based on his memories of the court of the Duke of Urbino. If Alberti painted the good householder for future generations, Castiglione painted the gentleman—graceful, attractive, courteous, liberally educated, noble in spirit if not necessarily in birth, at home either on the field of battle or among cultivated ladies. The concept of “the gentleman” owed much to chivalry and other traditional sources, but Castiglione presented it as a genuinely fresh ideal in the history of European civilization.

In the case of Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527), wide reading in the classics illuminated years of practical political experience. Machiavelli's career as ambassador and secretary of the Florentine government helped him to understand the political history of Rome as described by Livy, and Livy helped him to understand the power politics of his own age. Exiled by the Medici to his country home in 1512, he began to read widely and to reflect on what makes states expand and grow, what are the causes of political breakdown, how political leaders get and hold power, what can be learned from the past.

Machiavelli set down his reflections in a long, rambling book, *Discourses on Livy*, and in a briefer and more famous essay, *The Prince*. He made it clear that he was describing things as they were, not as they ought to be. Ideal states he left to others; in the world as it is, power is what counts. The Roman Republic, he thought, was the best example in history of successful state-building. Its constitution was a masterly blend of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy; it had good laws and a good citizen army; its religion supported the civic virtues of justice, prudence, and courage, not those of patience and humility; its rulers knew that the good of the state came before the dictates of individual morality. And so Rome, unlike any Italian city-state of Machiavelli's day, had been able to unite the whole of Italy and to endure for centuries.

But Machiavelli realized that this ideal, real though it once had been, might

be too difficult for a corrupt and divided group of Italian city-states to revive. Perhaps a prince of real *virtù*, with the courage of a lion and the cunning of a fox, might be able to learn the laws of politics from history and experience and use them to build a strong state in Italy. He would know that men in their collective relations with one another are bad, and therefore he would not be held back by any moral scruples. If others broke faith with him, as they certainly would, the prince must be prepared to break faith with them for the good of his state. Fortune might frustrate his work, but a man of *virtù* had at least an even chance of overcoming bad luck. If his generation had both the intelligence and the will, Machiavelli believed, something could be done about the helpless state of Italy, which was falling under the heels of France and Spain.

Machiavelli's *Prince* was to become a grammar of political and diplomatic practice to heads of state as remote as Mussolini and Hitler. In its origin it was a perfect example of the fruitful combination in Renaissance thought of classical "rebirth" and contemporary "new birth," of historical example and practical experience. Both his disillusioned analysis of things as they were and his passionate plea for reform were entirely characteristic of the age.

### *The Arts*

The influence of classical examples was strong also in the visual arts, but here original elements were even more noticeable than in social and political thought. Roman buildings survived, of course, all over Italy, Brunelleschi (1377?-1446), the greatest architect of his generation, absorbed their spirit and designed new churches in semiclassical style after 1420, thus inaugurating a return to the classical from the Gothic style in architecture. The late Roman sculpture that was dug up (hardly any of the Greek works of the classical age were yet known) inspired sculptors to imitation. But there were no ancient paintings to look at (Pompeii was not unearthed until the eighteenth century), and so Italian painters had to depend on the inspiration

## *Machiavelli on the Policy of Princes*

You must know, then, that there are two methods of fighting, the one by law, the other by force: the first method is that of men, the second of beasts; but as the first method is often insufficient, one must have recourse to the second. It is therefore necessary for a prince to know well how to use both the beast and the man.

A prince being thus obliged to know well how to act as a beast must imitate the fox and the lion, for the lion cannot protect himself from traps, and the fox cannot defend himself from wolves. One must therefore be a fox to recognise traps, and a lion to frighten wolves. Those that wish to be only lions do not understand this. Therefore, a prudent ruler ought not to keep faith when by so doing it would be against his interest, and when the reasons which made him bind himself no longer exist. If men were all good, this precept would not be a good one; but as they are bad, and would not observe their faith with you, so you are not bound to keep faith with them.

From Machiavelli, *The Prince*, in *The Prince and the Discourses*, ed. by Max Lerner (New York: Modern Library, 1940), Ch. 18, p. 64.

of their medieval predecessors and their own genius in elaborating their art.

Italian Renaissance painting, like that of France and Flanders, tended more and more toward realism. Giotto, the first Italian to develop the new style, was little influenced by northern art; later on some ideas were borrowed from the Low Countries (notably the use of oil paint). But north or south, the dominant interest of fourteenth-century writers, artists, and philosophers was in the concrete, individual thing as it actually existed, not in the general idea or eternal truth behind and in all things, which had been the typical concern of earlier medieval thinkers. Late medieval artists and writers tried to represent nature and man more and more realistically—to model a leaf as it actually appeared in nature, to chisel the features of a real man or woman, to sketch the character of a person in concrete detail, as both Boccaccio and Chaucer did with such success in their collections of tales. In fifteenth-century painting, particularly in the Netherlands, this effort resulted in the most astonishing skill in representing the smallest details of visual reality.

It was an Italian painter, however, who first realized that surface realism is

not enough, that the artist must conceive the human figure as a whole, place it in three-dimensional perspective, and arrive at a more sophisticated realism that sacrifices minute details to organic unity. This painter was Masaccio (1401–ca. 1428), the founder of Renaissance painting and one of the great innovators in the history of the art.

Italian painting of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries is far too rich in content and varied in technique for us to describe in detail. Some of its general characteristics may be suggested, however. The first thing that strikes the historical observer is the separation of painting and sculpture from architecture. It was as if the sculptured prophets and many-colored saints had stepped down from their niches and stained-glass windows in the great medieval cathedrals to be reincarnated in bronze statues in Italian public squares or painted portraits in Italian palaces. Painting and sculpture were no longer arts subordinate to architecture. Painters began to adorn the walls of monasteries and houses with frescoes. After they had learned from Flemish artists the technique of painting with oils, the Italians went on to develop the easel painting, meant to be hung in a palace or house and to be enjoyed for its own sake. Donatello (1368?–1466), in his *David*, was the first to model a free-standing nude figure, and from then on to the great works of Michelangelo (1475–1564) sculptors developed their art with no thought but of its own perfection.

The zest for solving fresh problems infected architects as well as painters and sculptors. Brunelleschi went far beyond classical or medieval models in designing and building his famous dome over the transept of the cathedral in Florence (1420–36). Architecture, sculpture, and painting each went its own way. An individual artist might turn his hand to all three, and a painter might borrow ideas from sculpture. But in each case the artist could create as he pleased without subjecting one art to another.

The second characteristic worth noting was the heightened individuality and social prestige of the artist. A famous passage in Cellini's *Autobiography* de-



Donatello's *David*, ca. 1440. Compare this with the *David* by Michelangelo on the opposite page.

scribes the unveiling of his bronze statue of Perseus in the central square of Florence in 1554. "Now it pleased God," he wrote, "that on the instant of its exposure to view, a shout of boundless enthusiasm went up in commendation of my work, which consoled me not a little." Such a shout might have greeted the proclamation of a crusade in the eleventh century or the triumphant conclusion of a world war in the twentieth. But the public appreciation of a work of art, the assumption that great art is the product of individual "genius," which is something to be nurtured—these were as characteristic of the Renaissance as they were atypical of ages before and after.

The artist was to the age of the Renaissance what the saint was to the Middle Ages and what the scientist was to be to the modern world. Italy's Golden Age was the golden age of the artist and the writer.

In seeking a higher realism, Italian painters studied the laws of spatial perspective about the same time that Humanists were restudying the temporal or historical perspective of their day. As a result the artists pictured real persons whom they knew, in recognizable space. Some of them spent their lives probing the psychological depths of human beings and trying to put on canvas what they found. The chief of these was the lonely scientific and artistic genius, Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519), whose curiosity about the secrets of nature was as insatiable as his curiosity about the nature of man. In painting *The Last Supper* he chose not the moment when Christ breaks the bread and remarks, "This is my body . . .," as a medieval artist might have done, but the more humanly dramatic and startling moment when He announces, "One of you will betray me." The resulting psychological crisis experienced by each disciple is carefully portrayed. The climactic episode of the Creation, as Michelangelo painted it on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in St. Peter's, was the creation of Adam—an almost superhuman man at the threshold of self-consciousness, languid, wondering, awakening—almost as if he were a symbol of the man of the Renaissance. According to some interpreters, Michelangelo chose to portray Moses at the moment when he has caught sight of his people's idolatrous Golden Calf and is struggling to control himself.

These few examples typify the Renaissance point of view. The central concern is man here in this world, troubled, striving, with unknown possibilities. Thus Renaissance art is humanistic in the broader, more philosophical meaning of the word. Not that the artists rejected God or ignored nature. God is still there, and Renaissance landscapes are charming. But God is seen through man, through man's heroism and his tragedy; and generally nature is of interest only as background or setting to the human



Michelangelo's *David*, 1501–04. Instead of representing David after his victory over Goliath, as Donatello did, Michaelangelo chose to represent him as watchful of the approaching foe, with muscles tensed in gathering strength.

drama. The most important question is what is to become of man. Pico della Mirandola, in a famous *Oration* on man's dignity (1486), pictured God as giving man something he had given to no other creature, the unique gift of freedom:

Thou, constrained by no limits, in accordance with thine own free will, in whose hands We have placed thee, shalt ordain for thyself the limits of thy nature. . . . We have made thee neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, so that with freedom of choice and with honor, as though the maker and molder of thyself, thou mayest fashion thyself in whatever shape thou shalt prefer.