

Topic 1.2: The Italian Renaissance

OVERVIEW

The Italian Renaissance was a “**rebirth**” of interest in **classical antiquity** (ancient Greece and Rome), which impacted education, culture, and art. **Capitalism** and modern banking techniques began to develop during this time, catapulting the city-state of **Florence**—a city that had been overshadowed by Venice during the Middle Ages—to cultural and economic prominence.

WHEN DID IT HAPPEN?

The Italian Renaissance began in the 14th century and gained momentum in the 15th century (**Quattrocento**) with the invention of the printing press and of new artistic techniques. The **Fall of Constantinople** in 1453 brought Greek scholars to Italy that popularized Greek classics. The **High Renaissance** (c. 1495 to 1530) represented the peak of artistic achievement during the Renaissance.

KEY TERMS

Humanism

Renaissance scholars championed an educational curriculum that focused on the study of classical history, philosophy, and literature, with the goal of producing individuals fit for leadership positions.

Secularism

The development of the **printing press** resulted in the mass production of classical texts, in addition to new texts, which weakened the Catholic Church’s control over information. This resulted in the Church having less control over intellectual life.

Patronage

Wealthy and influential Italians, such as the **Medici family**, used their wealth to patronize (support) the arts. Art was used to reflect the glory of these families and their cities. The papacy’s extensive patronage of the arts rebuilt the Vatican’s prestige after years of decline during the Avignon schism.

CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

*The Italian Renaissance represented a significant cultural **change** because...*

Due to increasing secularism, the Catholic Church, as an institution, exercised less direct control over education, the arts, and the economy than it had during the Middle Ages.

*The Italian Renaissance also represented significant cultural **continuity** because...*

Italy remained Catholic, and humanist philosophy combined classical and Christian ideas. Renaissance art continued to contain many Christian themes and subjects.

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PETRARCH: FATHER OF HUMANISM

In the 14th century, Petrarch, an Italian poet, discovered several letters written by **Cicero**, an ancient Roman scholar and orator, which had been forgotten. Petrarch developed an obsession with preserving classical texts. He unleashed his anger at medieval scholars, who he felt were responsible for the loss of many great classical works. He referred to the Middle Ages (the period between the Fall of Rome and his time) as the “**Dark Ages**,” from which the only rescue would be a “rebirth” of classical studies.

As a poet, Petrarch imitated classical literary forms, such as the epic in his poem, *Africa*, about the Roman general, Scipio Africanus. He also perfected new literary forms, such as the poetic **sonnets** that he wrote for Laura, his unrequited love interest. Petrarch has been honored in history as the **father of Humanism**.



Francesco Petrarca (1450) by Andrea di Bartolo di Bargilla

Other Italian Renaissance humanists followed Petrarch’s example, using the classics to produce new works of philosophy. **Pico della Mirandola** asserted in his *Oration on the Dignity of Man* that humans were at the center of divine creation because of their unique gift of free will. **Civic humanists** used insights gained from the classics to train men to be bold political leaders. **Machiavelli**, a civic humanist, wrote *The Prince* to encourage leaders to learn from the ruthless tactics of Roman emperors.

ITALIAN RENAISSANCE ART

Renaissance artists sought to imitate and surpass classical styles of painting. They developed a sense of **naturalism** beyond what had been seen in medieval art by portraying human subjects with realistic proportions. They employed new techniques, such as **linear perspective**, which made two-dimensional works of art appear three-dimensional. Renaissance art was heavily influenced by humanistic studies, as evidenced by the prevalence of Greek, Roman, and biblical figures in paintings, sculpture, and architecture.



The School of Athens, by Raphael, portrays philosophers of classical antiquity together in one place, with Plato and Aristotle at the center. Raphael modeled Plato after Leonardo da Vinci.