The Emergence of Modern Europe, 1500-1700 / Italian Renaissance / The Italian Renaissance: Revolutionary Change and New Directions

Every few hundred years, history undergoes revolutionary change because leaders and people find the status quo unacceptable and go in new directions. The Renaissance was such a era. Around 1400, some Italian intellectuals and statesmen created the Italian Renaissance and the rest of Europe followed in the next 100 years or so. Unlike the French Revolution at the end of the 18th century, the Renaissance was an intellectual revolution with no bloodshed. But its effects were just as profound and are still felt today. Major historical changes are impossible to predict. However, with the advantage of hindsight historians can pinpoint the reasons. The Renaissance emerged first in Italy because of a prophetic individual, humanism, a unique Italian heritage, a complex political system, and an economy able to support art and learning.

An individual pointed the way. The Italian scholar and poet Francesco Petrarca (1304–1374) looked at the world around him and found it wanting. He strongly criticized medieval patterns of thought, in particular the way that scholars taught philosophy, science, and theology. He rejected medieval Scholasticism, a program of methodical reasoning used in all branches of learning at the time. In place of medieval values and scholastic learning, Petrarca looked back to the literature and philosophy of the ancient pagan and Christian world for inspiration, advice on how to live, and literary models. Petrarca was also the finest vernacular poet of his day, and he wrote about his own loves, joys, and sorrows. His rejection of medieval patterns of thought and insistence on expressing in concrete ways the uniqueness of his own feelings, opinions, and experiences became a hallmark of humanism and the Renaissance generally.

By the time of his death a few Italians shared Petrarca's vision. By 1400, groups of Italian scholars, professionals, and merchants in several Italian cities, but especially Florence, had created an intellectual movement called humanism. It was simultaneously eloquent, ethical, pedagogical, and philosophical. At its core humanism meant looking to ancient culture as a model to admire and imitate in the belief that the literary, ethical, historical, political, and philosophical works of ancient Greece and Rome offered the best guides for learning and living. Humanism was the defining intellectual movement of the Renaissance in Italy and in the rest of Europe later. In order to perpetuate their cultural vision, 15th-century Italian pedagogical humanists created a new school curriculum based on studying ancient Latin and Greek texts, and the rest of Europe followed. Humanistic studies became the curriculum of choice for training leaders of society and members of the professional classes of Europe until the 1960s and are still important today.

Ancient Greece and Rome offered a standard against which Italian humanists could measure their own civilization. Examining the ancient world gave them the perspective needed to look at their own times with objective, often critical eyes. This encouraged the habit of criticism, of looking skeptically at received wisdom.
Eventually, men and women of the Renaissance even subjected the ancient world to careful examination and criticism. They then set out in new directions, as Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527) did in politics, Andreas Vesalius (1514–1564) in medicine, and Galileo Galilei (1564–1642) in science. Humanism prepared men and women to look for and to accept novelty, a key trait of the Renaissance and the modern world. This attitude influenced art, religion, music, and practically every other area of life.

Italians had the advantage of closer proximity to the ancient world than any other European people. The monuments and ruins of ancient Rome were all around them in great profusion in the 15th century, far more than today, when there are still an enormous number across Italy. The monuments provided daily reminders of what once was.

The political structure of Italy encouraged competition and diversity. Italy did not have a national government. Instead, it was divided into 6 major republican city-states and 10 major princedoms, including the papacy, plus smaller political units. Both republics and princedoms consisted of a city and its surrounding territory. Groups of merchants, manufacturers, bankers, and lawyers ruled republics, while one man and his family ruled princedoms. The division of Italy into many political units had a strong positive effect on learning and culture. Each state needed trained personnel, which the humanists helped provide, and every capital city and court wanted to outshine its neighbors. Hence, princes and city councils competed for the best artists, musicians, and scholars, and gave them the artistic freedom to create masterpieces. Different cities and courts developed unique styles in governance, art, and learning. Rome and Venice were remarkably different in the Renaissance, as they are today.

Italy's economy financed the Renaissance. Italy was rich, which meant that princes, nobles, merchants, high churchmen, and monasteries had a great deal of income to spend on learning, art, and music. Medieval Italian merchants and bankers had laid the foundations of Italian wealth when they began to dominate Europe's international trade in the 13th and 14th centuries. Although the voyages of discovery around 1500 would eventually displace Italian merchants from their central position in trade, Italian manufacturers compensated by producing new products to be sold in new markets, so that wealth continued to pour into the peninsula.

Historians generally agree that the above reasons explain why the Renaissance emerged first in Italy. But a lively debate about the relative weight of these factors emerged in the middle of the 19th century and continues today. Scholars of literature, philosophy, science, art, and music also study and debate the effects of the Renaissance. But they agree that the Renaissance changed the course of history.

About the Author

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Paul F. Grendler (b. 1936 in Armstrong, Iowa) is one of the most distinguished living historians of the Italian Renaissance. He received his PhD from the University of Wisconsin in 1964 and is currently Professor of History Emeritus, University of Toronto. He is the author of nine books and editor of two more. His books have won five prizes, and he has received many fellowships. He has been president of the Catholic Historical Association, the Renaissance Society of America, and the Society for Italian Historical Studies. Professor Grendler was elected to the American Philosophical Society in 2004.