

## The Renaissance

The Renaissance was a fervent period of European cultural, artistic, political and economic “rebirth” following the Middle Ages. Generally described as taking place from the 14th century to the 17th century, the Renaissance promoted the rediscovery of classical philosophy, literature and art. Some of the greatest thinkers, authors, statesmen, scientists and artists in human history thrived during this era, while global exploration opened up new lands and cultures to European commerce. The Renaissance is credited with bridging the gap between the Middle Ages and modern-day civilization.

## From Darkness to Light: The Renaissance Begins

During the [Middle Ages](#), a period that took place between the fall of ancient Rome in 476 A.D. and the beginning of the 14th century, Europeans made few advances in science and art.

Also known as the “Dark Ages,” the era is often branded as a time of war, ignorance, famine and [pandemics](#) such as the [Black Death](#).

Some historians, however, believe that such grim depictions of the Middle Ages were greatly exaggerated, though many agree that there was relatively little regard for ancient Greek and Roman philosophies and learning at the time.

**READ MORE:** [6 Reasons the Dark Ages Weren't So Dark](#)

## Humanism

During the 14th century, a cultural movement called humanism began to gain momentum in Italy. Among its many principles, humanism promoted

the idea that man was the center of his own universe, and people should embrace human achievements in education, classical arts, literature and science.

In 1450, the invention of the Gutenberg printing press allowed for improved communication throughout Europe and for ideas to spread more quickly.

As a result of this advance in communication, little-known texts from early humanist authors such as those by [Francesco Petrarch](#) and Giovanni Boccaccio, which promoted the renewal of traditional Greek and Roman culture and values, were printed and distributed to the masses.

Additionally, many scholars believe advances in international finance and trade impacted culture in Europe and set the stage for the Renaissance.

## Medici Family

The Renaissance started in Florence, Italy, a place with a rich cultural history where wealthy citizens could afford to support budding artists.

Members of the powerful [Medici family](#), which ruled Florence for more than 60 years, were famous backers of the movement.

Great Italian writers, artists, politicians and others declared that they were participating in an intellectual and artistic revolution that would be much different from what they experienced during the Dark Ages.

The movement first expanded to other Italian city-states, such as Venice, Milan, Bologna, Ferrara and Rome. Then, during the 15th century, Renaissance ideas spread from Italy to France and then throughout western and northern Europe.

Although other European countries experienced their Renaissance later than Italy, the impacts were still revolutionary.

# Renaissance Geniuses

Some of the most famous and groundbreaking Renaissance intellectuals, artists, scientists and writers include the likes of:

- [Leonardo da Vinci](#) (1452–1519): Italian painter, architect, inventor, and “Renaissance man” responsible for painting “The Mona Lisa” and “The Last Supper.”
- [Desiderius Erasmus](#) (1466–1536): Scholar from Holland who defined the humanist movement in Northern Europe. Translator of the New Testament into Greek.
- [Rene Descartes](#) (1596–1650): French philosopher and mathematician regarded as the father of modern philosophy. Famous for stating, “I think; therefore I am.”
- [Galileo](#) (1564-1642): Italian astronomer, physicist and engineer whose pioneering work with telescopes enabled him to describe the moons of Jupiter and rings of Saturn. Placed under house arrest for his views of a heliocentric universe.
- [Nicolaus Copernicus](#) (1473–1543): Mathematician and astronomer who made first modern scientific argument for the concept of a heliocentric solar system.
- [Thomas Hobbes](#) (1588–1679): English philosopher and author of “Leviathan.”
- [Geoffrey Chaucer](#) (1343–1400): English poet and author of “The Canterbury Tales.”

- Giotto (1266-1337): Italian painter and architect whose more realistic depictions of human emotions influenced generations of artists. Best known for his frescoes in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua.
- [Dante](#) (1265–1321): Italian philosopher, poet, writer and political thinker who authored “The Divine Comedy.”
- [Niccolo Machiavelli](#) (1469–1527): Italian diplomat and philosopher famous for writing “The Prince” and “The Discourses on Livy.”
- [Titian](#) (1488–1576): Italian painter celebrated for his portraits of Pope Paul III and Charles I and his later religious and mythical paintings like “Venus and Adonis” and “Metamorphoses.”
- William Tyndale (1494–1536): English biblical translator, humanist and scholar burned at the stake for translating the Bible into English.
- William Byrd (1539/40–1623): English composer known for his development of the English madrigal and his religious organ music.
- [John Milton](#) (1608–1674): English poet and historian who wrote the epic poem “Paradise Lost.”
- [William Shakespeare](#) (1564–1616): England’s “national poet” and the most famous playwright of all time, celebrated for his sonnets and plays like “Romeo and Juliet.”
- [Donatello](#) (1386–1466): Italian sculptor celebrated for lifelike sculptures like “David,” commissioned by the Medici family.
- [Sandro Botticelli](#) (1445–1510): Italian painter of “Birth of Venus.”

- [Raphael](#) (1483–1520): Italian painter who learned from da Vinci and Michelangelo. Best known for his paintings of the Madonna and “The School of Athens.”
- [Michelangelo](#) (1475–1564): Italian sculptor, painter, and architect who carved “David” and painted The Sistine Chapel in Rome.

## Renaissance Art, Architecture and Science

Art, architecture and science were closely linked during the Renaissance. In fact, it was a unique time when these fields of study fused together seamlessly.

For instance, artists like da Vinci incorporated scientific principles, such as anatomy into their work, so they could recreate the human body with extraordinary precision.

Architects such as [Filippo Brunelleschi](#) studied mathematics to accurately engineer and design immense buildings with expansive domes.

Scientific discoveries led to major shifts in thinking: Galileo and Descartes presented a new view of astrology and mathematics, while Copernicus proposed that the Sun, not the Earth, was the center of the solar system.

Renaissance art was characterized by realism and naturalism. Artists strived to depict people and objects in a true-to-life way.

They used techniques, such as perspective, shadows and light to add depth to their work. Emotion was another quality that artists tried to infuse into their pieces.

Some of the most famous artistic works that were produced during the Renaissance include:

- *The Mona Lisa* (Da Vinci)
- *The Last Supper* (Da Vinci)
- *Statue of David* (Michelangelo)
- *The Birth of Venus* (Botticelli)
- *The Creation of Adam* (Michelangelo)

## Renaissance Exploration

While many artists and thinkers used their talents to express new ideas, some Europeans took to the seas to learn more about the world around them. In a period known as the Age of Discovery, several important explorations were made.

Voyagers launched expeditions to travel the entire globe. They discovered new shipping routes to the Americas, India and the Far East, and explorers trekked across areas that weren't fully mapped.

Famous journeys were taken by [Ferdinand Magellan](#), [Christopher Columbus](#), [Amerigo Vespucci](#) (after whom America is named), [Marco Polo](#), [Ponce de Leon](#), [Vasco Núñez de Balboa](#), [Hernando De Soto](#) and other explorers.

**READ MORE:** [The Age of Exploration](#)

## Renaissance Religion

Humanism encouraged Europeans to question the role of the Roman Catholic church during the Renaissance.

As more people learned how to read, write and interpret ideas, they began to closely examine and critique religion as they knew it. Also, the printing

press allowed for texts, including the Bible, to be easily reproduced and widely read by the people, themselves, for the first time.

In the 16th century, [Martin Luther](#), a German monk, led the [Protestant Reformation](#) – a revolutionary movement that caused a split in the Catholic church. Luther questioned many of the practices of the church and whether they aligned with the teachings of the Bible.

As a result, a new form of [Christianity](#), known as Protestantism, was created.

## End of the Renaissance

Scholars believe the demise of the Renaissance was the result of several compounding factors.

By the end of the 15th century, numerous wars had plagued the Italian peninsula. Spanish, French and German invaders battling for Italian territories caused disruption and instability in the region.

Also, changing trade routes led to a period of economic decline and limited the amount of money that wealthy contributors could spend on the arts.

Later, in a movement known as the Counter-Reformation, the Catholic church censored artists and writers in response to the Protestant Reformation. Many Renaissance thinkers feared being too bold, which stifled creativity.

Furthermore, in 1545, the Council of Trent established the Roman [Inquisition](#), which made humanism and any views that challenged the Catholic church an act of heresy punishable by death.

By the early 17th century, the Renaissance movement had died out, giving way to the Age of [Enlightenment](#).

# Debate Over the Renaissance

While many scholars view the Renaissance as a unique and exciting time in European history, others argue that the period wasn't much different from the Middle Ages and that both eras overlapped more than traditional accounts suggest.

Also, some modern historians believe that the Middle Ages had a cultural identity that's been downplayed throughout history and overshadowed by the Renaissance era.

While the exact timing and overall impact of the Renaissance is sometimes debated, there's little dispute that the events of the period ultimately led to advances that changed the way people understood and interpreted the world around them.

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