

The term *rinacita*, or rebirth, was coined by the art historian Vassari in his book *The Lives of the Artists*; in it Vassari described a dark age illuminated by the paint brushes of the artists, beginning with Cimabue in the late 1200's. However, even classifying a date to the beginning of this rebirth is not easy. Jules Mechelet coined the term *renaissance*, French for rebirth, to describe a period of history that he defined from the time of Christopher Columbus (1492) to Galileo (d. 1642). A simple definition that one may find in an encyclopedic style textbook of the renaissance is the rebirth of classical culture. However, the so-called rebirth of the classical past was merely part of a much larger transition that cannot be shoehorned into a simplistically defined historical period. When defining the renaissance in such a way, it becomes easy to place a value judgment on the term "rebirth" and simply classify all things renaissance as those things that were new, and by implication, any idea or event that does not fit into the a modern worldview is medieval, or backwards, or in darkness, or competing with an inevitable movement toward the betterment of society. However, history is not so simple, and in order to try and understand the period of time that has been labeled the renaissance is to describe this period in historical context, with an eye toward a transitioning intellectual movement that stemmed from a rediscovery of classical sources. But the transition was not due to a discovery, or rediscovery, of any particular idea; rather, the rediscovery of sources led to a challenge of traditionally held ideas of gaining knowledge or truth itself. The renaissance was a period of transitioning worldview that stemmed from medieval thought and yet showed the seeds of modernity.

The ideas of the renaissance were not created in a vacuum, but rather were products of various social, political, and economic developments of the high and late middle ages between the 11th and 16th centuries. The Crusades, which began in 1095, sent Western Europeans across the continent and brought them into contact with new ideas and, more importantly for the economic development of western Europe, new material goods that were brought back as spoils of war, were traded, and in turn, created a revival of international trade that did not exist during the feudal world of the medieval period. Additionally, the Bubonic plague that swept across Europe between 1347 and 1350, leaving nearly one-third of Europe's population dead, created a shortage of workers on the manors, which hindered feudalism's economic and political hold on European society. Cities, often crippled and empty since the fall of Rome, reemerged as centers of trade, including the trade of ideas. By the 1400's the increase in trade allowed a middle class to develop that was not of noble blood but none-the-less accumulated wealth. The middle class seemed to emerge first in Italy due to the central location on the Mediterranean Sea and the rivers that allowed returning Crusaders to trade in various cities. Various territories in Italy competed to accumulate wealth and middle class merchants began to alter, not only the economic world but the political and intellectual world as well. The Medici of

Florence created a de facto dictatorship through their accumulation of wealth and introduction of much needed credit through banking. Not being of noble birth was a concern for the Medici in this transitioning world that still held onto noble titles, but the Medici used the newly emerging economic world to their political and social advantage. Giovanni de Medici loaned funds to a former pirate named Beldasaro Casso in an ambitious attempt to rise through the ranks of the Catholic Church. Giovanni's son, Cosimo "the Elder" de Medici, used his wealth and new found status in society to patron the art work of artists who dared to express ideas that broke the mold of traditional thought. Donatello's *David*, commissioned by Cosimo, was the first free-standing bronze sculpture of a nude man since ancient Rome. Nudity in art, while practiced in the pagan cultures of Greece and Rome, was in stark contradiction to the art of the Christian medieval world. The Medici family continued to admire and embrace the classical culture and became the patron of various renaissance artists, such as Michaelangelo, Botticelli, Brunelleschi and others, who put brilliant colors and realistic perspective to the emerging ideas of the age.

The renaissance ideas that were expressed by the artists and pursued by the philosophers were not newly created ideas but rather a result of centuries of development. Pope Sylvester II, who began his papacy in 999, was one of the first to spark the scholastic movement and the rebirth of education during the high Middle Ages. Pope Sylvester II and Gerard of Cremona both traveled to Spain and discovered, in Arabic libraries, many manuscripts that had been lost to the western world after the fall of Rome. Sylvester, the "mathematical pope," brought Arabic numerals to Christendom, which replaced the less mathematically useful Roman numerals, and also reintroduced the abacus to the Christian world. In the 12th century, Gerard of Cremona, like Sylvester before him, traveled to Spain and found vast Muslim libraries with manuscripts formerly unknown to the West such as the medical writings of Persian physicians, which Gerard translated himself. Mathematics, and natural philosophy, including that of Aristotle, was reintroduced to the west and a revival of learning known as the 12th century renaissance was born. Medieval universities adopted scholasticism as the intellectual basis of gaining truth. Medieval learning consisted of synthesizing any discrepancies between sources. Aristotle's logical explanation of the natural world and philosophy was generally accepted, as were the teachings of church fathers and councils. Medieval scholasticism was the attempt to reconcile any discrepancies by illustrating how a seeming contradiction between church fathers, sometimes centuries apart, were actually explaining the same idea, and a synthesis between their discrepancies would create a more complete understanding of a topic. The rediscovery of ancient texts in the 12th century and earlier led to a rebirth of learning dominated by the scholastic method.

By the 16th century Humanism began to compete with scholasticism as the basis for gaining knowledge. Scholasticism's most prominent weakness was the assumption that interpretations of a source were not contaminated by the biases of the philosophers discussing them in the medieval period. This was certainly not true. For example, medieval philosophers depicted Ovid's *The Art of Love* as a story of divine love, based on Medieval Christianity's influence on their worldview, rather than a manual for seduction as Ovid intended. Humanists desired to study cultural texts in order to understand the world of the ancients; Of course, many of the texts had been lost making it impossible to study them. In the 14th century Petrarch, who first expressed the idea of a dark age after the fall of Rome, expressed his desire to read the classical literature for himself rather than rely on the interpretations of others. He found that a copy of Homer's epic poems still existed but the West had been dark to the Greek literature, and he himself was "deaf to Homer." After reading a long awaited Latin translation of Homer's poems, he wrote a letter to Homer as a way of expressing concerns with traditionally held ideas about Homer's works. But many works were thought to be lost forever. However, in 1453 when the Ottoman Turks took over Constantinople Christian scholars headed West and brought with them cultural manuscripts that the Latin world had not seen in a millennium. Western scholars studied the texts themselves; they actively sought them out, and then challenged the previously held scholastic ideas of gaining knowledge. The movement to rediscover classical sources of a cultural nature became the basis of humanism and created a challenge to the scholasticism of the medieval universities.

However, scholasticism and humanism were not completely contradictory; rather, the two methods of defining truth created the unique intellectual development that defined the renaissance. Scholasticism was based on the idea of synthesizing information; humanism was based on a reverence for the history, philosophy, rhetoric, and art of the ancient Greek and Roman civilizations. Humanists believed that the world's greatest civilizations must have understood the world in such a way that it was compatible with their own worldview. The Greek philosophers such as Plato and Socrates were considered compatible with Christian philosophy, and the humanists began to explore and synthesize the philosophies. Many Humanists were also Neo-Platonists. Pico Della Mirandola who wrote *Oration on the Dignity of Man* which has become known as the manifesto of the renaissance, had so much respect for the philosophy of other cultures, from ancient Greece and Rome to the Muslim Turks of his time, he ambitiously attempted to synthesize all human philosophy with Christianity. Both the scholastic desire to synthesize competing ideas and humanism's admiration for the culture of other civilizations created the intellectual, or educational worldview of renaissance Europe.

The intellectual renaissance between the 14th and 17th century planted the seeds of the modern worldview politically, socially, and religiously. The belief that man was capable of remaking society emerged along with the admiration for man, which the humanists embraced. People believed that man was capable of achieving greatness. The 15th century emulation of the classical cultures, like Cosimo de Medici's building of an academy like Plato's, or Brunelleschi's dome on the cathedral in Florence that emulated the Roman Parthenon, turned, in the 16th century, to the idea of surpassing the classical world. Leonardo da Vinci, known as a true "renaissance man," had little respect for the so-called "wisdom of the classics" but rather believed that men could achieve more, could be better. Thomas More, an English political philosopher, criticized societal institutions in his 1505 book *Utopia*, while Niccolo Machiavelli in Florence praised the new structure of political power in his 1515 book *The Prince*. Neither More nor Machiavelli placed the utmost power in the hands of those with noble blood, as it was during the feudal middle ages. More suggested that an ideal society without money and power to lead to corruption would free people to embrace their inherent goodness; therefore people could remake society. For, Machiavelli, it was the Prince, the great leaders, that could mold and shape a government, and by extension a society, like a piece of art. Machiavelli discussed the way in which a Prince should hold power at all costs, even that of ruthlessness. Each author removed the Catholic Church's political position from his version of society. More pushed for religious tolerance assuming that one was theist (an irony given More's own prosecution of Protestants), while Machiavelli believed the Church to be only a societal institution and emphasized that a Prince only need the appearance of faith and not genuinely hold to its tenants. Machiavelli's ideas were controversial even in his day because the medieval idea of Christendom, and moreover, Christian beliefs in general, remained part of the European worldview. But Europe was becoming more secular as people began to embrace nationalism as monarchs such as Henry VIII of England, Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain, or Charles IX of France came to control more and more loyalty from the growing middle class. The papacy went through a period of corruption in later half of the 15th century that continued into the 16th century. Pope Alexander VI's secular lifestyle drew the attention of a Dominican monk named Savonorola in Florence. Savonorola opposed Alexander VI's papal reign, as well as many of the artistic and cultural movements that would later be classified as renaissance, until Alexander had Savonorola burned at the stake as a heretic when buying off the belligerent monk with a bishop's cap did not work. Leo X of the prominent Medici family of Florence, threw such elaborate parties that he bankrupted the papacy after a sort time as the Holy Father. In order to raise funds he began to sell salvation in the form of indulgences. A German monk named Marin Luther publically opposed this action and other corrupt practices of the Church by posting his *95 Theses* on the door of the Church in Wittenberg. Luther, who

was very much influenced by humanism's desire to study classical sources on their own merit challenged 1500 years of Church doctrine by suggesting that perhaps the medieval church fathers and Leo X had misunderstood Biblical principles and Luther suggested that an interpretation of the Bible built on the idea of salvation by grace alone and not through papal pardons was the answer. Others such as Erasmus, a clergyman from the Netherlands and perhaps the greatest Christian Humanist of the renaissance, also criticized the medieval traditions as empty rituals and the lack of holding vows as truly sacred in his book *In Praise of Folly*. While Erasmus never left the Church and Savonarola died believing he was justified in his criticisms, Luther's ideas spread throughout Europe creating the Protestant Reformation. The Protestant reformation created a rift in the Catholic Church that led to wars and a fundamental division in Christianity that still exists today.

The renaissance of the 16th century was not a bolt of lightning that struck the medieval world and burnt it to the ground; it was a process. The 12th century saw a rediscovery of ancient sources in the fields of math and natural philosophy spearheaded by Christian leaders that began a revival of education. Petrarch was a 14th century writer who loved classical literature and expressed the earliest humanist ideas. In the 15th century an influx of classical manuscripts about history, moral philosophy, poetry and other subjects that make up the study of the humanities flooded into Western Europe sparking an intellectual change in the fundamental ways in which knowledge is gained. By the 16th century there the intellectual movement that began in the High Middle Ages impacted the political thought of those such as Thomas More or Niccolo Machiavelli, the religious ideas of Erasmus and Martin Luther, and the scientific ideas of Leonardo da Vinci and others. The 17th century began a scientific revolution that literally changed the way people viewed the world and their place in it. While their worldview was still a foreign one to the modern way of thinking, they represented a shift in the worldview from the Medieval to the Early Modern era.