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## Renaissance Values

Values are the ideas and beliefs a person finds most important. Individuals have values; groups of people living in the same time and place tend to have similar, shared values. Values are expressed in the arts, in government, in every aspect of life. For example, practicality and usefulness are commonly held American values in the 20th century. Therefore, our great buildings are no longer highly decorated with impractical carvings, steeples, and statues. Instead, our skyscrapers are slabs of glass and steel. People in the Middle Ages valued the spiritual side of life and getting to heaven. Their important buildings were cathedrals with vaulted ceilings that invited visitors and worshippers to look toward heaven. Buildings express values.

Renaissance people had certain common values, too. Among them were humanism, individualism, skepticism, well-roundedness, secularism, and classicism (all defined below). These values were reflected in buildings, writing, painting and sculpture, science, every aspect of their lives. Most were inherited from the Greeks and Romans and many have been passed on to us. Our values make us act, create, and organize ourselves differently from 20th-century Chinese, Indians, and Africans. Our values can be traced to the Renaissance.

*Humanism*, a Renaissance value, is the belief that "the human being is the measure of all things," that people and their activities are important and interesting. People who are not humanistic see the human being as insignificant. They place more value on God (or the gods) or on science or nature or whatever.

Renaissance people were also *individualistic*. They thought it right to be themselves, think for themselves. They were, of course, members of groups—the Church, families, and so on. Nevertheless, their own ideas and activities gave them their sense of who they really were.

*Skepticism*, or having a *questioning attitude* was another Renaissance value. It was seen as a good thing to experiment, try new things, and shake up the system. In the Middle Ages exactly the opposite had been considered right—accept, do not question, have faith.

Renaissance people valued *well-roundedness*. They thought the ideal person was one who was interested in many things, active in many fields.

*Secularism* means worldliness or a belief in the importance of this life on earth. Making money, traveling, and making your house comfortable are secular activities. Praying is not. The spirit of the Renaissance was more secular than religious.

Finally, Renaissance people valued *classicism*. They were interested in the classical age, the time of the Greeks and Romans. And the classical age was a time when people were also secular, individualistic, humanistic, and questioning. So Renaissance people looked back to find their roots. We, too, can learn something about ourselves and what we consider important by looking back—to the Renaissance.