

## What was the Renaissance?

The **Renaissance** was a golden age of art, literature, and science in Europe lasting from about 1350 into the 1500's. The term literally means rebirth and refers to a rediscovery, or rebirth, of the art and learning of classical Greece and Rome. Renaissance artists and scholars frowned on the art and culture of the Middle Ages and, instead, took their inspiration from the classical heritage. During this period, Europeans experienced a revolutionary change in their mental outlook. The medieval mind was deeply religious, superstitious, and mainly concerned with thoughts of guilt, sin, and life after death. However, Renaissance thought was focused on the present day and celebrated human achievement and individuality. This new way of thinking was called **humanism**. Humanist scholars studied and revived classical Greek and Roman learning. Their goal was to gain knowledge and then spread this knowledge to others. As a result, people began to concentrate less on spiritual things and more on the world they lived in. This focus on worldly things of the here and now is called **secular**. The spirit of the Renaissance was truly secular.

## Causes of the Renaissance

As a result of the Crusades, trade expanded and strengthened the economy of Europe. This golden age of artistic achievement known as the Renaissance was financed by popes, merchants, and bankers of great wealth who were willing to promote art and education. The Renaissance began in Italy because the city-states such as Rome, Genoa, Pisa, and Venice were wealthy enough to finance the huge artistic and cultural enterprises of the period. In Spain, many classical Greek and Roman texts were uncovered after the country was reconquered from the Muslims. This literature rapidly spread throughout Europe and greatly contributed to the growth of learning during the Renaissance. Additionally, the decline of the Byzantine empire caused many well-educated Christians to come to western Europe after fleeing from Muslim invaders. This "brain drain" benefited the West by bringing much needed skills and learning to Europe. All of these factors came together to stimulate a period of astonishing creative achievement.

## Art and literature

Finally, a new type of person emerged from the Renaissance known as a **Renaissance man**. The goal of the Renaissance men was the intellectual growth and development of the complete person. Ideally, such a person was able to do many things equally well such as painting, sculpture, science, music, literature, and even athletics. A large number of many-sided geniuses were produced during the Renaissance. Leonardo da Vinci was perhaps the greatest example of this. Painter, sculptor, inventor, architect, musician, and engineer, da Vinci is regarded by many as the greatest light of the Italian Renaissance. His most famous work is his painting, the *Mona Lisa*. Michelangelo was a sculptor, engineer, poet, painter, and architect and among his achievements are the *Statue of David*, and the painted ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Rome. In literature, Dante wrote about a journey through hell, purgatory, and heaven in his masterpiece, *The Divine Comedy*. The Spanish writer Cervantes brilliantly and hilariously expressed Renaissance ideas by poking fun at the traditions of knighthood and chivalry in his book *Don Quixote*. It became the most popular book in Europe. William Shakespeare, writing in England around 1600, is an example of a northern Renaissance writer. He wrote extensively about human beings and the joys and sorrows of life.

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