Florence and the Renaissance: Crash Course European History #2

Crash Course: European History
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Hi I'm John Green and this is Crash Course European History.

So, as you'll recall from our previous episode, a declining European population due to disease and war in the 14th century meant that labor had become much more valuable, which shifted long-held beliefs about how society should be organized. Amid all this upheaval, and to some extent because of it, the Florentine author Francesco Petrarca, aka Petrarch, was unleashing his critique of 14th century life. "Living," he lamented, "I despise what melancholy fate/ has brought us wretches in these evil years."[i] Oh, Petrarch, are you sure you weren't writing about now?

It's almost like people always feel like they live in the worst possible time. At any rate, not happy with the state of things in Europe, he turned to Plato, Cicero, and other ancient writers, whom he thought of as residents of the Old Age. In fact, Petrarch gave the era in which he lived its name--calling them the "middle ages" just as his writing and research helped usher in a New Age that we now call the Renaissance. [Intro] According to Renaissance author Leonardo Bruni in the early fifteenth century, "Francesco Petrarch was the first with a talent sufficient to recognize and call back to light the ancient elegance of the lost and extinguished style." The Renaissance, meaning revival or renewal, hearkened back to what was seen as the bright light of classical antiquity, which had then been obscured in the dark and ignorant Middle Ages.

But in some ways, the Middle Ages existed simultaneously with the Renaissance. Like just as scholars were reviving translations of Plato and integrating knowledge from the Islamic world, the bubonic plague went on killing people; and in Petrarch's hometown, ordinary people like the Ciompi were vigorously protesting living conditions.

Which brings us to an old question here at Crash Course: Was the Renaissance really a thing? Was it in fact just a continuation of the medieval world? Or was it the dramatic change that Renaissance thinkers believed it to be? The writers and thinkers of the Renaissance scoured monasteries for ancient works, initially written or at least influenced by Roman writers. It was from this manuscript-hunting--especially for works by Cicero, and Tacitus, and Quintilian--that Renaissance scholars began to focus on so-called humanism. That is to say, they became more interested in worldly and human concerns.

And because the Renaissance really was a revival, this new thought was based on learning about old or ancient ways, especially in the study of the "humanities". The three liberal arts of grammar, rhetoric, and logic, led to the so-called sciences of theology, philosophy, laws, and medicine. The study of the humanities as developed by the ancients focused not on the heavens or saints but on human speech or rhetoric, human logic, and the correct use of language. And by language, of course, they mostly meant Latin--being able to write in Latin and even perform Latin orations was seen as key to a fully educated life, as every high school Latin teacher will be happy to tell you.

Competence in these fields was seen as crucial to developing the self and a prerequisite for joining Florentine or Venetian elites. Like, Venetian youth Lauro Quirini, for example, studied the humanities at the University of Padua and then was sent to work in a Venetian enterprise on Crete, fully prepared for his new job as a commodities trader, although he also worked as a translator and a writer. You might say he was a real Renaissance Man. I'm sorry.

The Italian city-states were the heartland of the early Renaissance. In these prosperous cities, artists, composers, writers, and scholars thrived along with the commerce that paid for everything. Urban merchants and manufacturers built a brisk business that brought in products and ideas from around Afroeurasia. And some families achieved immense wealth, which allowed them to support the world of Renaissance thinkers and artists in a system called patronage. I would like a phenomenally wealthy patron like Lorenzo Medici. If any of you are out there, I am available. And I would like all your ducats. You can visit patreon.com/crashcourse.

But at any rate, banking institutions also sprang up, and bankers funded civic events and the construction of lavish cathedrals. Bankers also backed or personally paid for the building of masterworks in the classical style--that is, in the style of the restrained, stately design of the pre-Christian Roman Empire. Did the Globe open? Is there a neoclassical piggy bank in the center of the world? There is! You know all those white statues of the renaissance that take their whiteness from the white statues of the ancient Greeks and Romans? Yeah, they were not white! They were painted. Like, here are some of our best guesses of what actual classical statues looked like, and as you can see, not very much like neoclassical white piggy banks. Nonetheless, the idea of unpainted marble, or porcelain, or whatever has proven so powerful that even though we now know that ancient statues were painted, we still don't paint our neoclassical ones.

Bankers also financed artists needing funds to complete their works, including Botticelli and Michelangelo. And city governments themselves were also important patrons of the Renaissance, while individual leaders often spent as much as six percent of their personal income on the arts. Why? Well, largely for the same reason rich people fund art and buildings today--for status, for recognition, and maybe even for the love of beauty. But also, funding public art and cathedrals and the like served to legitimize the wealth of these families. The Church could not very well condemn merchant wealth if it was used to build churches, nor could the governments that came to depend on it.

We see this again and again throughout history--wealth supports institutions that in turn legitimize that wealth Regardless, in these artworks, you can see the paradoxes of the Renaissance--paganism is combined with Christianity, as it often had been throughout Christian history. Profit-oriented bankers financed the Church, which was run by priests who'd taken a vow of poverty, and founded by a figure who in the gospels overturns the tables of moneylenders in the temple. Also, In these city-states, access to a more humanistic educational approach helped boost economic growth and fueled the creation of much art and architecture that is still really influential. Now, many city states participated in this humanist revival, but its headquarters was undoubtedly Florence. Let's go to the Thought Bubble.

Artists of the time were following ancient styles and taking them further. Visual artists, like Sandro Botticelli and Michelangelo, focused on human dignity and realistic details. Botticelli's portraits of Florentine citizens display the distinct features of his subjects, while his depictions of religious individuals show, for example, a plump infant Jesus realistically reaching for his mother's garments. Botticelli's portrait of the long-dead Dante similarly displayed his long, thin, and pointed nose rather than some idealized, formulaic hero. And Michelangelo's "David" presents truly human characteristics even as it sought to copy ancient sculptural styles.

Across the spectrum of Renaissance art, anatomical accuracy flourished, which you can see in Michelangelo's sculptures and also in the work of fellow Florentine Leonardo da Vinci-- both artists, incidentally, were able to render the human form in part because they both dissected cadavers. And nature, as a setting for humans and thus humanism, was also glorified in Renaissance art, as you can see in the Birth of Venus.

Botticelli's painting focuses on the mythical goddess from the classical world but at the same time she's about to be clothed in

the flowers found in the natural world of the countryside. In short, the artists of the Renaissance focused on situating a realistically depicted human body in both its natural environment and its civic setting. Thanks, Thought Bubble.

But amid this prosperity and cultural revival, Florentine history was marked by a succession of economic and natural shocks, class divisions, corporate rivalries, party struggles, conflicts with the church, and especially political crises. And those arose from threats of external invasion as well as internal tyranny and discontent among the lower classes.

Like Venice, Florence took great pride in being a Republic, although it was a bit different from contemporary republics and exceedingly unstable. Like, there weren't really elections; instead, names of members of Florence's guilds would basically be drawn out of a large leather bag, and if your name was drawn, you got to serve on the Signoria, which ran the city. And if you weren't psyched about the job, no worries--new Signorias were chosen every two months, which might make it seem like lots of people were able to participate in civic life, but 1. In order to be a member of a guild, you needed to be debt-free and male and well-connected, and 2. in truth the lotteries were often rigged, with wealthy families tending to win places on the signoria.

Also, there were frequent coups and counter-coups, and the Republic would often cease to be republican and at times become downright Monarchical. It was all quite Games of Thronesy--one might even say that it was a bit Machiavellian. And no wonder--the political theorist Niccolo Machiavelli did live in Florence. We'll discuss him more next week, but for now, it's important to know that he saw--and suffered through--much of this turmoil, including the rise and fall and rise again of the Medici family.

The Medicis were tremendously powerful in Florence, although contrary to what you might read they weren't the only important family in the Renaissance. But they did make huge sums in banking and investing, and were important patrons to artists--in fact Michelangelo carved one of their tombs. Cosimo Medici and his grandson Lorenzo dominated the second half of the fifteenth century, in Florence, while successive members of the family perpetuated its power and patronage by serving as popes in the next centuries.

Machiavelli argued that the Florentine Renaissance's Golden Age ended with the death of Lorenzo de Medici in 1492 and the invasion of the "barbarians." Of course, "Barbarians" mostly means "Not Us" throughout history--in fact the word itself comes from a feeling that the language of Barbarians sounded like bar bar bar bar bar. Anyway, these particular Barbarians were French, so I guess it sounded like Bar. I wasn't very good at High School French.

And so we return at last to the old question: Were there really broad shifts away from the religiofication of all aspects of European life toward the human and the secular in the Renaissance? Like, Michelangelo sculpted David, but he also painted the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Perspective matters when you ask these questions--something important and new was happening in 14th century Florence (and Venice and Milan and so on) among merchants and intellectuals. But the lives of average people, especially peasants, were not much transformed by this humanist thinking--at least not in the short run.

But in other ways, ordinary people did also have a Renaissance--ancient authors were translated into Italian and French, which allowed those without access to Latin to read Cicero and the like. But of course most Italian peasants couldn't read anything.

Historians also debate whether women experienced a Renaissance. Women were among the patrons of the arts: Isabella d'Este sponsored musical events and loved Petrarch's poems so much that she had music composed for them. She also sponsored painters, maintaining contacts with Leonardo da Vinci. But, Isabella d'Este and her similarly accomplished sister Beatrice are often seen as the exception.

In general men, according to fifteenth century writer Laura Cereta, discounted women's intellectual worth. Deliberately following Petrarch's path as he had followed Cicero's, Cereta wrote a famous letter to one misogynist that read in part: "I cannot tolerate your having attacked my entire sex. . . . With just cause I am moved to demonstrate how great a reputation for learning and virtue women have won by their inborn excellence, manifested in every age as knowledge. . . ."[ii] Also, the rise of Roman legal thinking meant the rise of the Pater Familias. The idea that the father is the center of every family, and also the center of power.

All of which is to say that the Renaissance saw tremendously important developments in the intellectual and cultural life of Italian city-states, developments that would soon be exported to other communities. But we have to be able to shift perspectives--to the Medicis, the Renaissance was a thing. To many peasants, it was not.

We remember the Renaissance today partly because it's helpful for historians to periodize history to frame their analyses, and partly because so much Renaissance thinking shapes our thinking. And I think it's worth remembering how the ideas of the Renaissance continue to resonate for us today. Consider, for example, the feeling that the current age is so full of corruption and destruction that we must return to the purity of some bygone era of greatness. That Renaissance thinking seems very relevant, indeed. Thanks for watching. I'll see you next time.

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Sources

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