



THE RENAISSANCE

Renaissance is the French word for **rebirth**. It is the time of change that happened in Europe between the 14th and 16th **centuries**.

It was an age of **growth** in Europe. New, powerful **city states emerged**. A new middle class had more and more money to spend. Great **artists**, writers and thinkers lived during this time.

During the Middle Ages many people who lived in the countryside worked on the land that they got from the **noblemen**. **In return**, they were **protected** by them.

City life changed towards the end of the Middle Ages. There was a small middle class population and people had more **freedom** than in the countryside.

The Plague

Between the middle and the end of the 14th century, the **plague**, also called Black Death, killed almost half of Europe's population. It **spread** most **rapidly** in the larger cities where many people lived.

This led to **economic depression**. **Merchants** and **traders** had fewer people to sell their **goods** to, so they lost a lot of money.

The New Middle Class

When the **plague** slowly faded away in the 15th **century**, the population in Europe began to grow. A new middle class **emerged** —bankers, **merchants** and tradespeople had a new market for their **services**.

People became **wealthier** and had more than enough money to spend. They began to build larger houses, buy more expensive clothes, and started to show interest in art and literature.

The middle-class population also had more free time, which they spent learning **foreign** languages, reading, playing musical instruments, and studying other things of interest.

The Renaissance was **especially** strong in Italian cities. They became centres of **trade**, **wealth**, and education. Many cities, like Venice, Genoa and Florence had famous **citizens** who were very rich and gave the city a lot of money.



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Exploration and Trade

Exploring the seas and sailing to other continents became very important during this **era**. **Sailors** had better instruments and **maps**, ships were built so that they could **endure** longer **journeys**. Most of them had big sails that were driven by strong winds.

Portuguese **navigators** started to **explore** the western coast of Africa from which they brought gold and **ivory** home. Later on, they **discovered** that sailing around the southern **tip** of Africa would bring them to India and Asia. These places offered **spices, valuable cloths, and silk**. Explorers brought them home and sold them to **wealthy** families in Europe.

After Columbus had **discovered** America in 1492, many Spanish, French and Italian **explorers** followed. The Spanish were the most successful. They **conquered** much of Central and South America and brought home gold and silver from the Inca and Aztec **empires**.

Printing

In 1445 the German Johannes Gutenberg **invented** the **printing press**. He changed the lives of millions of people **throughout** Europe. For the first time, bookmaking became cheap, and Gutenberg was able to print many books very quickly.

In the Middle Ages books were very expensive because they were written by hand. Only **priests** and **monks** could read them because most of them were in Latin.

In the Renaissance the middle classes had the money to buy books, but they wanted books that they could read in their own language. A **publishing boom** broke out and buying and selling books began to **prosper** in many European countries. People bought travel books, **romances, poetry** and **almanacs**. They read more and became better educated.



Gutenberg printing press

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Humanism

The printing of books led to a new way of thinking. **Scholars** of the Renaissance returned to the writings of Greek and Roman **philosophers**. These writings are called the “classics”. More and more scholars learned to read Greek and Latin and studied old manuscripts on **topics** like **science**, art and life.

During the Middle Ages people were **guided** by the church, which was against **wealth**, **trading goods** and other **worldly** interests. Humanists, however, did not believe that much in religion. They thought that money and trade were important in life and that **citizens** needed a good **general education**.

During the Renaissance a churchman named Martin Luther changed **Christianity**. In 1517 he wrote a list of things that he didn't like about the church and **posted** them on the door of his church in Wittenberg, Germany.

Luther also wanted the church to hold **masses** in German instead of Latin so that people could understand them better. Many other Christians agreed that the church was **in need of** change. Luther and others **founded** new religions and separated from the Roman Catholic church.



Martin Luther's 95 thesis on what he didn't like about the Roman Catholic church

Image: Martin Luther, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

Arts and Architecture

In the Renaissance **artists** and architects used mathematics to plan their works. They **discovered** that many objects in nature have a certain **proportion**. They called this the **golden mean**. It is often found in the **shape** of a leaf or in the form of buildings. Many of them found out that the human body also **displayed proportions**. Renaissance architects built new buildings that were **symmetrical**.

Artists of the Renaissance started to experiment with **perspective** in their works. They learned that if they made an object smaller and put it in the background of a picture it **appeared** farther away. They also painted with more **realism** than earlier artists.

Many great artists of that time started their **studies** or worked in Florence. Michelangelo was the most famous **artist** of the Renaissance. He studied painting and sculpture in Florence, where he created his famous sculpture of David for the Florence cathedral. In his later life he painted the **ceiling** of the Sistine chapel in the Vatican—probably his most famous piece of art.



Florence

Although changes took place everywhere in Europe, Florence was the centre of the Renaissance. Fifteenth **century** Florence was an exciting place to be. At that time the city was **independent** and had a population of about 60,000.

12 **guilds** controlled **trade** in the city. The members of these guilds were very rich and held high positions in the city's **government**. They also gave the city a lot of money.

Most powerful among the guilds were the textile workers. Florence was the centre of cloth making and **cloth** trading. Wool of excellent quality came from England. In Florence the raw material was cleaned, **spun**, **dyed** and **woven**. The finished material was very expensive and sold in other European cities.

Another **source of income** was banking. Many families of Florence were successful bankers. They even produced a gold **coin**, the florin, which became popular in all of Europe. The most famous bankers were the Medici. They controlled Florence up to the beginning of the 18th **century**.

Leonardo da Vinci

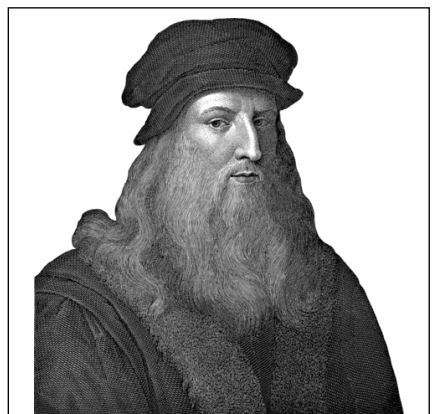
Leonardo da Vinci (1452—1519) was one of the most famous people of the Renaissance period. He was not only a famous painter but also studied **science**, **designed** machines, and drew plans for new **inventions**.

Young Leonardo grew up near Florence and studied painting with the great painters of the city. After a few years in Milan, where he painted for a famous **duke**, he came back to Florence and painted a new hall for the **city council**.

In his paintings da Vinci experimented with many **techniques** that artists hadn't used



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Leonardo da Vinci

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before. For example, he started to use **perspective** in his paintings. He put small objects in the background to make them **appear** far away. He also experimented with light, **shade** and colours.

The *Adoration of the Kings* is an unfinished painting. You can only see the figures as **outlines** of light and dark areas. In this painting he shows three kings who **worship** the Christ child.

Da Vinci finished painting *The Last Supper* in 1497. The painting shows the last meal of Jesus Christ and his 12 **apostles**. In the picture Jesus has just **announced** that one of them will **betray** him. He created this famous scene on a wall of a dining room in a **monastery**.

Mona Lisa is probably the most famous painting ever painted. It is a portrait of the young wife of a Florentine **silk merchant**. It shows a young woman with her famous smile sitting on a balcony high above a landscape.



Mona Lisa

Image: [Leonardo da Vinci](#), Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

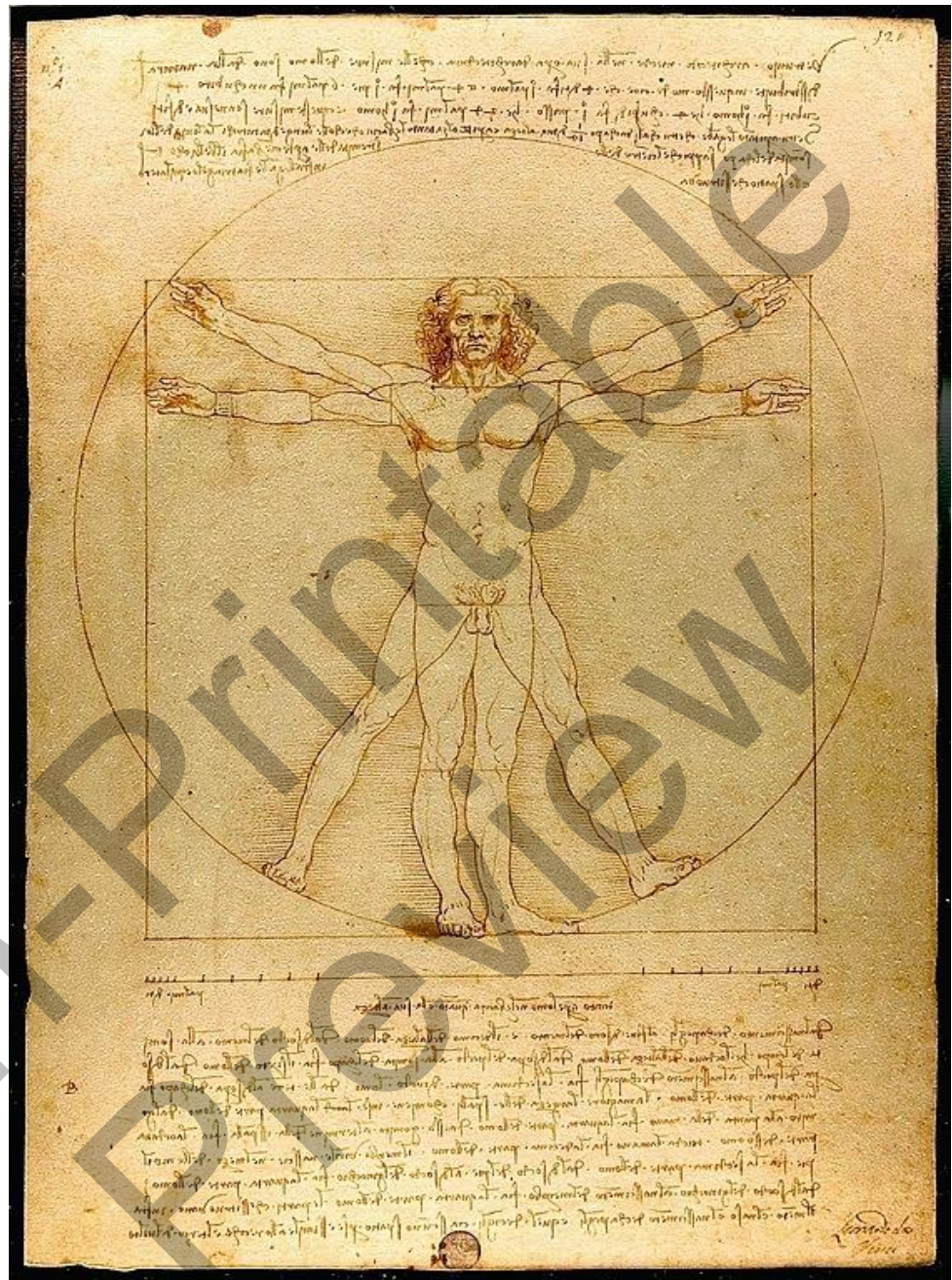
Da Vinci's Other Interests

Leonardo was interested in **mechanics** and he had ideas that no one had thought about before. For example, he drew plans for an airplane, a helicopter and a **parachute**. He sometimes worked as an **engineer** or military architect and **designed tanks**, machine guns and bridges that could be moved.

Da Vinci showed great interest in the human body. He **dissected** dead people in order to study bones and other parts of the body. He also made **drawings** to show how the human body worked. Like other artists, da Vinci was interested in the **proportions** of the human body. In his drawing of the Vitruvian Man, he showed that a human being fits perfectly into a circle and a square. It is one of the most famous pictures of European art.

Nature and the **growth** of plants and trees was also one of da Vinci's fields of interests. He tried to find out what made birds fly.

Later on, da Vinci started writing books on many of these topics but never completed them. They were forgotten but when they **appeared** again **centuries** later, they showed that Leonardo da Vinci was far ahead of his time.



Leonardo da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man*

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Photographer: Luc Viatour, <https://lucnix.be/>