

RENAISSANCE ITALY

Teachers' Notes

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RENAISSANCE ITALY 1400 - 1600ce

In French, the word Renaissance means "to be reborn". The Renaissance was a period of great invention and discovery in Italy and other European countries. Italians of this time loved new ideas and appreciated beautiful works of art, and were particularly excited by the ideas and culture of ancient Greece and Rome. The Renaissance was a time of wonderful accomplishments in architecture, literature, art, music, science and exploration.

THE CITY STATES

The Italian Peninsula was at the crossroads of the world. From its many ports, ships would travel far and wide to engage in commerce. Trade routes also extended overland to rich European countries such as Spain, France, Germany and the great trading nation of the Netherlands. This made cities in central and northern Italy very wealthy. Italy was divided into many city-states, with different forms of government. During the Renaissance, five powerful city states emerged. Venice and Florence were republics, nominally ruled by senates, but they were in fact controlled by a small group of nobles and wealthy capitalists. Milan was a Duchy and part of the Holy Roman Empire. Milan's most influential ruler was Francesco Sforza, who transformed the city into a powerful metropolis. Naples consisted of the entire southern half of the Italian peninsula and was ruled by a king. The Papal States were ruled by the popes, who came from the nobility and could scarcely be considered churchmen. They were ruthless politicians whose central goal was the expansion of their political power.

The city state of Venice was a trading superpower whose ships were protected by a powerful navy. Venice controlled a large empire in the eastern Mediterranean, trading throughout the Middle East, and was described as the 'New Rome'. In addition, it was a trading post where merchandise could be imported without taxes. Merchants could then on-sell goods for a greater profit. Venice's unique location, with its lagoons and islands, provided protection from outside interference with its strategic trade routes.

The religious and political centre of Venice was located at St Mark's Square. There was a flourishing commercial area around the Rialto. Naval and merchant ship building was conducted at the Arsenale. Industries such as glass-making was situated away from the main islands. Unlike most Italian cities, the political institutions remained stable and the population appeared to enjoy social harmony, leading to the perception of the city as *La Serenissima*, the most serene one.

Florence is generally described as the 'Cradle of the Renaissance'. It developed from a small Roman settlement on the river Arno into a walled urban environment. Florence had no port, but its wealth came first from the cloth trade, fine wool making, and later silk. Trade was undertaken on a scale never seen before, with Florence developing commercial links with Northern Europe and the Middle East. The Florentines became successful bankers, lending money throughout Europe.

The Mercato Vecchio area of Florence developed into the economic hub of city, with the wool industries close to the river, and the religious centre near Santa Maria Della Fiore. The Piazza Della Signoria was the political heart of the city.

QUESTION 1: How many City States were there in Italy during the Renaissance and what were their names?

QUESTION 2: Why was trade important to the cities of Venice and Florence?

SOCIETY

The Catholic Church was the most important influence on society, providing the moral teachings of a Christian way of life. During the Renaissance, power within the cities was controlled by the nobility and the trade guilds. By the fifteenth century, Florence had twenty-one guilds that shaped the working lives of everyone within the city. The Wool Guild was the most powerful, representing 200 firms, which employed 30,000 people, one-third of the population. Seven elite guilds held political power in Florence, with only their members eligible for election to city government.

The family bond was a source of great security. Parents carefully arranged marriages to strengthen business or family ties and this was reinforced by a legally binding marriage contract. The most important aspect of the contract was the size of the dowry, a sum of money presented by the bride's family to her husband upon marriage. Central to the family was the husband, who managed the finances and made crucial decisions that determined his children's lives. His wife, who had no wealth of her own, managed the household, a position that gave women a certain degree of control in their daily lives. Most wives, however, knew that their primary function was to bear children, and upper-class women were frequently pregnant. But childbirth was a fearful occasion, with one woman in ten dying.

Social status was reflected in what someone wore, where they lived, what they ate and how they made a living. Renaissance Italy pioneered radical changes in the treatment of the poor, with the ruling elite and the church providing networks of charity including orphanages, workhouses and shelters. Most recipients of charity were women. Social welfare support focused on aspects of women's poverty such as illegitimate births, hunger, unemployment, and domestic violence.

QUESTION 3: How does the lives of women in the Renaissance compare to that of women today?

POLITICS and CONFLICT

There was often conflict between the Italian city-states. The most significant war occurred in Lombardy between 1423 and 1454.

It was a series of four campaigns between the Republic of Venice and the Duchy of Milan, and their respective allies, for control of northern Italy.

Later, during The Italian Wars, from 1494 to 1559, Italy was split into numerous rival states, most of which sought foreign alliances to increase their individual power. They became prey to national states such as France and Spain, who fought for control of Italy.

Powerful families often dominated the politics of the Italian City States. Except for brief periods during the Renaissance, Florence was ruled by the Medici family, most notably Cosimo de' Medici. After his father's death in 1429, Cosimo controlled his family's network of banks, but wanted more: control of the government. Too smart to take absolute power, he used his money and influence to get rid of people who challenged him, and encourage those who supported him. The rule of the Medici family began a long period of political stability, during which Florence became even more wealthy and powerful.

QUESTION : What methods did the de' Medici family use to get rid of their opponents?

QUESTION: List all the wars fought in Italy during the Renaissance.

CULTURAL ACHIEVEMENTS – THE HUMANISTS

The Renaissance was considered a rebirth of learning, with a revival of interest in the classical antiquity of Greece and Rome. The humanists were scholars who believed the past was as vivid and exciting as the present. Their work involved finding, copying and translating old texts, which took an enormous amount of time. These scholars were helped by a major conflict. In 1453, Constantinople (modern-day Istanbul) was captured by the invading Turks. Hundreds of brilliant scholars fled the country, taking with them Greek manuscripts, with many ending up in Italy. By the end of the fifteenth century, the humanist scholars had translated nearly all the classics. Some of the first writers engaged in this were Francesco Petrarch, Dante and Giovanni Boccaccio. Petrarch, a writer of passionate and beautiful sonnets, was fascinated by the ideas of ancient thinkers. He also found forgotten copies of the works of the Roman writer Cicero, and Roman historian Livy. This led to a major revelation: people believed that you could find answers to the issues of the present in books of the past. Petrarch's discovery of Livy's 'History of Rome' made a significant contribution to this.

To finance their work, scholars sought support from wealthy patrons. A patron would supply money, food and often accommodation to the scholar. In return, the scholar would dedicate his work to his patron. The Medici family was famous for such sponsorship. Cosimo de' Medici supported the humanist thinker and scholar Leonardo Bruni. Cosimo also created a school based on the works and ideas of the Greek philosopher Plato. Later, Lorenzo de' Medici supported influential artists such as Botticelli and Verrocchio.

In Venice, art patronage was controlled by wealthy citizens, social organizations and the Church. Artists, architects, musicians, and writers benefited substantially.

These included Giovanni Bellini (1430-1516), Titian (1488-1575) and Tintoretto (1518-1594). In return for their financial support, Venetian patrons created a lucrative market for what we refer to as "Venus" scenes. Massive amounts of money was also spent on building projects and decorating the city. Many private residences had grand facades on at least two sides, since they can be seen from both the water and the land. Venice remains one of the most beautiful cities on earth because of this building campaign.

QUESTION : How did Lorenzo de' Medici make himself the centre of a circle of scholars?

SIGNIFICANT INDIVIDUALS

Niccolo Machiavelli was brilliant but misunderstood. His name has been used to coin the term 'Machiavellian', meaning a ruthless determination to gain power at any cost. Machiavelli never recommended this approach to politics, but simply described politics in Italy at the time. He began his career as a diplomat, representing Florence during a period of genuine republican government, which was not dominated by a powerful family.

When the Medici family regained power in 1512, they feared opposition from Machiavelli. As a result, he was arrested, tortured and dismissed from his employment. He retired to his farm outside Florence, a bitter and angry man. Machiavelli wrote a book, *'The Prince'* describing the realities of political life as he knew it, which led to his harsh reputation. The book states that political rulers could be forgiven for lacking such Christian values as tolerance and forgiveness. Instead, they had to be cruel and ruthless when dealing with their enemies, in order to defend the interests of their people. This was shocking at the time, and Machiavelli was described as lacking in any morals. Others admitted he was right. His most violent critics were the clergy. The English Cardinal, Reginald Pole, wrote in 1539 that *'The Prince'* was written "by Satan's hand." Modern critics such as British philosopher and Nobel laureate Bertrand Russell described it as: "a handbook for gangsters".

Lucrezia Borgia was born into a privileged family, but life in the upper classes of Renaissance Italy was dangerous. Lucrezia was used as a pawn to further the political plans of her father, Rodrigo, who was elected Pope Alexander the sixth in 1492 . At age eleven, she was forced to marry a Spanish noble of the Sforza family, a man twice her age. Her next husband, a young man she genuinely loved, was murdered by her own family. Finally, her father insisted she marry Alfonso d'Este, who would become ruler of the city of Ferrara. She was disliked by her in-laws, fell pregnant then became ill with malaria, leading to a dangerous miscarriage. When her father-in-law died in 1505, Alfonso became ruler.

Lucrezia finally found her place, and set a tone of sophistication within the household. She organised the princes to have stylish social gatherings and show an interest in fashion, food, scholarship and the arts.

Her husband, however, remained a rough man, who was more interested in warfare than the social graces. When he left to fight against Venice in 1508, she stepped in to rule. At the young age of thirty, she proved that a woman could be an excellent ruler in times of warfare and upheaval.

Galileo Galilei was born in Pisa in 1564, the son of a cloth merchant. At school and later at the University of Pisa, he proved to be an outstanding student. He chose to learn by experimenting and observing the real world. As a young man, he was quickly promoted to professor of mathematics. Galileo's experiments were simple. He proved that heavy and light things fall at the same speed, by dropping objects of different weights from the Leaning Tower of Pisa, confirming they hit the ground at the same time.

Galileo relocated to the University of Padua in 1592 and while there, heard of a Dutch invention we now call a telescope. He built his own, and hurried to Venice to show it to members of the Senate and the Doge, Leonardo Donato. Because a telescope could be used on both Naval and merchant ships, the Venetians saw its value and gave him a well-paid job. This allowed him time to use his invention, called the 'eye reed', to study space, and recorded his findings in his book 'The Starry Messenger'.

He became interested in the theory formulated earlier by the Polish scientist Nicolas Copernicus, which stated that the earth revolved around the sun. The Catholic Church was furious that scientific ideas questioned its teachings. Central to the Catholic faith was the belief that God created the Earth, which was the centre of the Universe, with all planets revolving around it.

In 1615, Galileo respectfully asked the church's permission to investigate the structure of the Universe. Eventually in 1624, Pope Urban the 8th, a man open to new ideas, agreed in writing that Galileo could publish a book detailing his results. Galileo insisted that his findings would not be an attack on the doctrine of the Catholic Church. His book 'Dialogue of Great World Systems' was completed in 1632. Galileo was summoned to Rome to appear before the Holy Office, also known as the Inquisition, to explain his theories, which supported those of Copernicus. The Church insisted that he recant his beliefs or face torture. Because he was 68 years old and in poor health, Galileo chose to publicly admit his findings were wrong. He retired to a country house near Florence, where he secretly wrote one more book, which was smuggled to Holland and published. Old age and blindness finally stopped his extraordinary work, and he died in 1642.

It was not until 1992 that the Catholic Church admitted that Galileo's discoveries were accurate, but offered no apology for his treatment.

QUESTION: Explain the term 'Machiavellian'.

QUESTION: What political leader of the 20th Century could be described as having Machiavellian tendencies?

QUESTION: In what way is Lucrezia Borgia's family connected to Machiavelli's description of political power?

QUESTION: Why do you think the Catholic Church was so opposed to Galileo's scientific and mathematical explanation of the Universe?

ART & ARCHITECTURE IN THE RENAISSANCE

The fifteenth-century Florentine architect, Leon Battista Alberti, expressed the new Renaissance philosophy to emphasise individual ability: *“Men can do all things if they will.”*

The style of painting, sculpture and decorative arts identified with the Renaissance emerged in Italy in the late 15th century. It is reflected in the works of Italian masters such as Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo and Raphael. Renaissance art sought to capture the experience of the individual and the beauty and mystery of the natural world. The greatest achievement in Italian art during this period was to make human figures look real and three-dimensional.

Leonardo da Vinci is famous for one painting, the 'Mona Lisa'. But, he was a man whose intelligent mind led him to investigate many subjects and to make some astounding inventions. He designed flying machines, an armoured vehicle, concentrated solar power, an adding machine, and also outlined a rudimentary theory of plate tectonics. Relatively few of his designs were constructed or were even feasible during his lifetime due to the lack of sufficient power to drive them. He began his career as a painter in the studio of Andrea Del Verrocchio in Florence. Da Vinci also studied and sketched the natural world. In his desire to paint the human body accurately, he sketched live models and dissected corpses to understand human anatomy. In fact, modern doctors describe his studies of the body to be accurate in every detail.

The Italian city states were often at war with each other. Between 1492 and 1499, Leonardo worked for the Duke of Milan, Ludovico Sforza, designing weapons of warfare. During this time, he was commissioned to paint 'Virgin of the Rocks' and 'The Last Supper'. Leonardo has been described as the Renaissance man by historians, since he was able to turn his mind to any form of art or invention.

Sforza was overthrown by Charles the Eighth of France and Leonardo escaped to Venice, where he worked as a military engineer and architect. In his later years, his wealthy patrons included the Borgia and Medici families.

Michelangelo (1475 – 1564) was considered the greatest living artist of his time, and many of his paintings, sculptures, and architecture rank among the most famous in existence. Two of these, the *Pietà* and *David*, were sculpted before he turned thirty. From 1508-1512, Michelangelo created the amazing fresco on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. It stretches over 500 square metres and contains more than 300 figures. It was a work of unprecedented grandeur, and fifteenth century architect, writer and historian Giorgio Vasari wrote: *“The work has proved a veritable beacon to our art, of inestimable benefit to all painters, restoring light to a world that for centuries had been plunged into darkness”*. At the age of 74, Michelangelo succeeded Antonio da Sangallo the Younger as the architect of St. Peter's Basilica. Michelangelo transformed the plan, and the Basilica was completed to his design, after his death.

Near the Vatican, Donato Bramante's Tempietto of San Pietro, built in 1502, is considered a masterpiece of High Renaissance Italian architecture. Despite its small scale, it is perfectly proportioned, composed of slender Tuscan columns and a dome. The dome was a model for the one Bramante designed for St Peter's Basilica. Florence has perhaps the most impressive examples of Renaissance architecture. The Duomo, with its magnificent dome engineered by the architect Filippo Brunelleschi, dominates the skyline. Consecrated in 1436, the dome is 114.5 metres high. 37,000 tonnes of material, including over 4 million bricks, were used in its construction.

QUESTION: What inventions by Leonardo da Vinci, have been put to practical use in modern times?

QUESTION: What was the importance of Michelangelo's painting of the Sistine Chapel to Renaissance Art?

QUESTION: Name five influential artists from other European countries during the Renaissance?

SPREAD OF RENAISSANCE CULTURE

In 1515 the French King, Francois I, personally led an army to conquer the city state of Milan. Like his predecessors, Francois saw something new - culture and knowledge. He marvelled at the splendours of Rome and Florence, with their striking mansions and villas. This beauty illustrated the prestige of the Italian rulers, and he reproduced this in his Palace at Fontainebleau. Here, he organised great dinners, plays, concerts and festivals. Those who visited Francois were dazzled by his wealth and power. Francois surrounded himself with humanist scholars, and learned from the Italians the importance of women at court, which had been dominated by men. Women brought an air of fashion and grace, but they could also display their intelligence and education, and were encouraged to be politically involved. Francois commissioned many talented Italian painters to work for him. In 1516, he attracted the ageing Leonardo da Vinci to France, appointing him 'First Painter, Engineer and Architect to the King'.

Leonardo brought with him the 'Mona Lisa', which he chose not to deliver to the patron who commissioned it. Leonardo spent his final years at his home in Clos Luce, at Amboise in the Loire Valley. He was a personal friend to Francois, who was at his bedside when he died. Leonardo is buried in the Chapel of Saint-Hubert in the Château d'Amboise.

The Renaissance spread quickly, beginning in the fifteen century, from its birthplace in the Italian city-states to the rest of Europe. The invention of the printing press by German printer Johannes Gutenberg, allowed the rapid transmission of new ideas. With the growth of the Renaissance, these ideas diversified and changed, adapting to local culture. Inside the Basilica of Santa Croce in Florence lay the remains of some of the brilliant men at the forefront of the Italian Renaissance: the great thinker Machiavelli; Galileo, the father of modern physics and space exploration; Dante, the writer and humanist and Michelangelo, the exceptional artist, sculptor and architect.

QUESTION : Where in France would you find the Chateau de Fontainebleau?

QUESTION : How was Francois I a patron of learning and culture?

QUESTION : In what way did the invention of the printing press assist in the spread of Renaissance culture and knowledge?