

What Was the Renaissance?

By Sharon Fabian

For much of history, humans have had to spend their time surviving. Prehistoric people probably spent nearly all of their time hunting for food and keeping themselves safe from predators. As recently as the 1930's, when the Great Depression struck, Americans went into survival mode, spending all of their efforts on getting the necessities of life. Today in many parts of the world, survival is still all that people can think about.

At certain times and places, however, people have been luckier. When the conditions were just right, people became free to spend their time and energy on something special. This is what happened in Europe during the Renaissance. Many factors combined to make Renaissance Europe a special, creative place.

The Medieval Era which had defined Europe for so long was beginning to come to an end in the 1300's. The Black Plague wiped out a large part of the population of Europe. It also weakened people's faith in the Christian church, which had exerted so much control over the lives of medieval people. Advances in military equipment, such as the invention of long-range cannons, brought an end to medieval warfare and, so, to the feudal system. Europe was ready for a change.

People began to look to education and science for answers. Greek and Roman writings that had been discarded years ago were dusted off and studied once again. People began to consider new answers, new ideas, and new ways of doing things. The ideas of individual people became valued. This renewed belief in the potential of individual human beings became known as Humanism and became a hallmark of the Renaissance.

Creative people like writers and artists began to produce works that were new and different from medieval art work. Paintings were more lifelike and less formal than medieval paintings. Writers tried to understand human nature through their writings.

People of the Renaissance were able to do this, in large part, because of the sponsorship of rich and powerful patrons. Wealthy families of businessmen, who had made fortunes in international trade, took an interest in having art and learning in their cities. They were willing to spend lots of money to sponsor artists, scholars, and craftsmen who would produce works that would bring education and creativity to their city.

The Medici family in Florence, Italy, and the Sforza family in Milan, Italy, were two of the most wealthy and influential Renaissance families. The Medici family made their city of Florence a center of Renaissance culture. The Sforza family did the same for Milan. They sponsored creative people in many fields, including art, architecture, literature, and science.

Artists like Leonardo da Vinci, Giotto, Titian, Raphael, Michelangelo, and Botticelli painted some of the world's most famous works of art in the cities of Renaissance Europe. Architects like Brunelleschi designed their beautiful buildings there. Inventors like Gutenberg came up with new creations, and scientists like Galileo and Copernicus announced discoveries that changed the way people understood the world. Explorers like Christopher Columbus set sail from Renaissance Europe.

These giants of the Renaissance, and many others, left a legacy of beautiful and innovative work. They gave the word "Renaissance" the meaning that we know it by today " a time of extraordinary creativity and accomplishment.

This special period in our world's history continued for about 300 years.