



Michelangelo painted the entire Sistine Chapel ceiling by himself, in 1511.

## 13

## European Society in the Age of the Renaissance

## chapter outline

- The Evolution of the Italian Renaissance
- Intellectual Hallmarks of the Renaissance
- Art and the Artist
- Social Change
- The Renaissance in the North
- Politics and the State in the Renaissance (ca 1450–1521)

While the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse seemed to be carrying war, plague, famine, and death across northern Europe, a new culture was emerging in southern Europe. The fourteenth century witnessed the beginnings of remarkable changes in many aspects of Italian society. In the fifteenth century, these phenomena spread beyond Italy and gradually influenced society in northern Europe. These cultural changes have been collectively labeled the “Renaissance.”

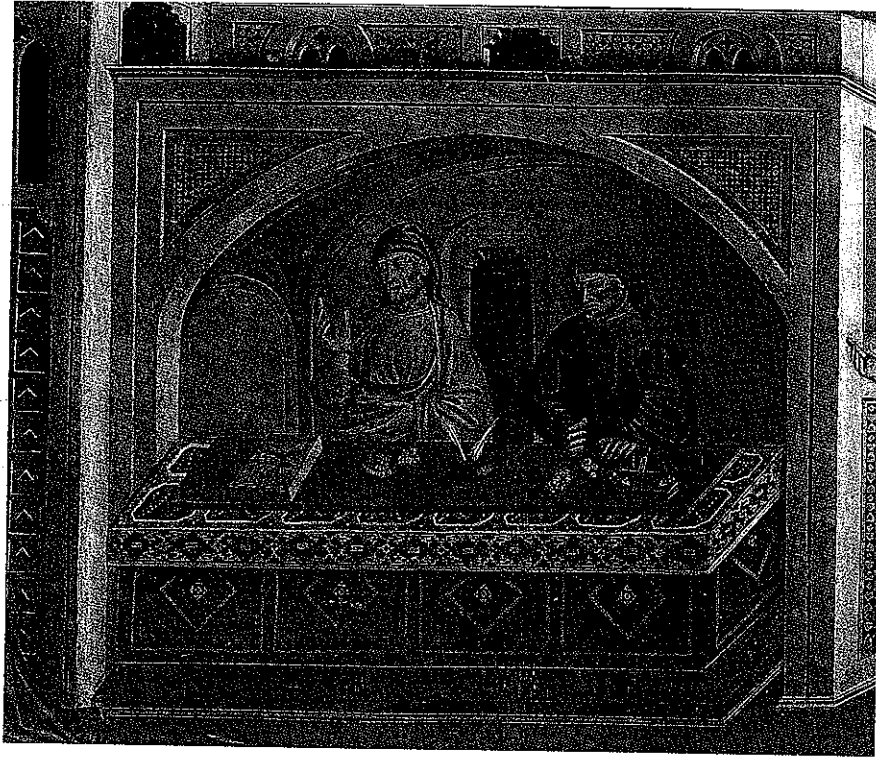
- What does the term *Renaissance* mean?
- How was the Renaissance manifested in politics, government, and social organization?
- What were the intellectual and artistic hallmarks of the Renaissance?
- Did the Renaissance involve shifts in religious attitudes?
- What developments occurred in the evolution of the nation-state?

This chapter will concentrate on these questions.

### The Evolution of the Italian Renaissance

Economic growth laid the material basis for the Italian Renaissance. The period extending roughly from 1050 to 1300 witnessed phenomenal commercial and financial development, the growing political power of self-governing cities, and great population expansion. Then the period from the late thirteenth to the late sixteenth century was characterized by an incredible efflorescence of artistic energies.<sup>1</sup> Scholars commonly use the term **Renaissance** to describe the cultural achievements of the fourteenth through sixteenth centuries; those achievements rest on the economic and political developments of earlier centuries.

In the great commercial revival of the eleventh century, northern Italian cities led the way. By the middle of the twelfth century, Venice, supported by a huge merchant marine, had grown enormously rich through overseas trade. It profited tremendously from the diversion of the Fourth Crusade to Constantinople (see page 355). Genoa and Milan also enjoyed the benefits of a



**A Bank Scene, Florence** Originally a “bank” was just a counter; if covered with a carpet like this Ottoman geometric rug with a kufic border, it became a bank of distinction. Moneychangers who sat behind the counter became “bankers,” exchanging different currencies and holding deposits for merchants and business people. (*Prato, San Francesco/Scala/Art Resource, NY*)

large volume of trade with the Middle East and northern Europe. These cities fully exploited their geographical positions as natural crossroads for mercantile exchange between the East and West. Furthermore, in the early fourteenth century, Genoa and Venice made important strides in shipbuilding that allowed their ships for the first time to sail all year long. Advances in ship construction greatly increased the volume of goods that could be transported; improvements in the mechanics of sailing accelerated speed. Most goods were purchased directly from the producers and sold a good distance away. For example, Italian merchants bought fine English wool directly from the Cistercian abbeys of Yorkshire in northern England. The wool was transported to the bazaars of North Africa either overland or by ship through the Strait of Gibraltar. The risks in such an operation were great, but the profits were enormous. These profits were continually reinvested to earn more. The Florentine wool industry was the major factor in that city’s financial expansion and population increase.

Scholars tend to agree that the first artistic and literary manifestations of the Italian Renaissance appeared in Florence, which possessed enormous wealth despite geographical constraints: it was an inland city without easy access to sea transportation. But toward the end of the

thirteenth century, Florentine merchants and bankers acquired control of papal banking. From their position as tax collectors for the papacy, Florentine mercantile families began to dominate European banking on both sides of the Alps. These families had offices in Paris, London, Bruges, Barcelona, Marseilles, Tunis and other North African ports, and, of course, Naples and Rome. The profits from loans, investments, and money exchanges that poured back to Florence were pumped into urban industries. Such profits contributed to the city’s economic vitality. Banking families, such as the Medici in Florence, controlled the politics and culture of their cities.

By the first quarter of the fourteenth century, the economic foundations of Florence were so strong that even severe crises could not destroy the city. In 1344 King Edward III of England repudiated his huge debts to Florentine bankers and forced some of them into bankruptcy. Florence suffered frightfully from the Black Death, losing at least half of its population. Serious labor unrest, such as the *ciompi* revolts of 1378 (see page 404), shook the political establishment. Nevertheless, the basic Florentine economic structure remained stable. Driving enterprise, technical know-how, and competitive spirit saw Florence through the difficult economic period of the late fourteenth century.

1420	1445	1470	1495	1520	1545
<b>Political/Military</b>					
● 1422-1461 Charles VII revives France and monarchy		● 1434-1494 Medici family in power in Florence		● 1494 Invasion of Italy by Charles VIII of France	● 1521 Start of Habsburg-Valois Wars
● 1469 Marriage of Isabella of Castile and Ferdinand of Aragon					
<b>Social/Economic</b>					
● 1420-1485 Flow of Balkan slaves to the eastern Mediterranean; flow of African slaves to the western Mediterranean					
<b>Intellectual/Religious</b>					
● 1454 Invention of movable type		● 1456 Gutenberg's Bible		● 1500-1527 High Renaissance (Leonardo, Raphael, Michelangelo)	
● 1506 Pope Julius II begins work on Saint Peter's Basilica					
● 1508-1512 Michelangelo paints ceiling of Sistine Chapel					
● 1513 Machiavelli, <i>The Prince</i>					
● 1516 More, <i>Utopia</i>					
● 1528 Castiglione, <i>The Courtier</i>					

### Communes and Republics

The northern Italian cities were **communes**, sworn associations of free men seeking complete political and economic independence from local nobles. The merchant guilds that formed the communes built and maintained the city walls, regulated trade, raised taxes, and kept civil order. In the course of the twelfth century, communes at Milan, Florence, Genoa, Siena, and Pisa fought for and won their independence from surrounding feudal nobles. The nobles, attracted by the opportunities of long-distance and maritime trade, the rising value of urban real estate, the new public offices available in the expanding communes, and the chances for advantageous marriages into rich commercial families, frequently settled within the cities. Marriage vows often sealed business contracts between the rural nobility and the mercantile aristocracy. This merger of the northern Italian feudal nobility and the commercial aristocracy constituted the formation of a new social class, an urban nobility. Within this nobility,

groups tied by blood, economic interests, and social connections formed tightly knit alliances to defend and expand their rights.

This new class made citizenship in the communes dependent on a property qualification, years of residence within the city, and social connections. Only a tiny percentage of the male population possessed these qualifications and thus could hold office in the commune's political councils. A new force, called the **popolo**, disenfranchised and heavily taxed, bitterly resented their exclusion from power. The popolo wanted places in the communal government and equality of taxation. Throughout most of the thirteenth century, in city after city, the popolo used armed force and violence to take over the city governments. Republican governments—in which political power theoretically resides in the people and is exercised by its chosen representatives—were established in Bologna, Siena, Parma, Florence, Genoa, and other cities. The victory of the popolo, however, proved temporary. Because they practiced the same sort of political exclusivity as

had the noble communes—denying influence to the classes below them, whether the poor, the unskilled, or new immigrants—the popolo never won the support of other groups. Moreover, the popolo could not establish civil order within their cities. Consequently, these movements for republican government failed. By 1300 **signori** (despots, or one-man rulers) or **oligarchies** (the rule of merchant aristocracies) had triumphed everywhere in Italy.<sup>2</sup>

For the next two centuries, the Italian city-states were ruled by signori or by constitutional oligarchies. In signorial governments, despots pretended to observe the law while actually manipulating it to conceal their basic illegality. Oligarchic regimes possessed constitutions, but through a variety of schemes a small, restricted class of wealthy merchants exercised the judicial, executive, and legislative functions of government. Thus in 1422 Venice had a population of eighty-four thousand, but two hundred men held all the power; Florence had about forty thousand people, but six hundred men ruled. Oligarchic regimes maintained only a façade of republican government. The Renaissance nostalgia for the Roman form of government, combined with calculating shrewdness, prompted the leaders of Venice, Milan, and Florence to use the old forms.

In the fifteenth century, political power and elite culture centered on the **princely courts** of despots and oligarchs. "A court was the space and personnel around a prince as he made laws, received ambassadors, made appointments, took his meals, and proceeded through the streets."<sup>3</sup> The princely court afforded the despot or oligarch the opportunity to display and assert his wealth and power. He flaunted his patronage of learning and the arts by munificent gifts to writers, philosophers, and artists. He used ceremonies connected with family births, baptisms, marriages, funerals, or triumphant entrances into the city as occasions for magnificent pageantry and elaborate ritual.

### The Balance of Power Among the Italian City-States

Renaissance Italians had a passionate attachment to their individual city-states: political loyalty and feeling centered on the local city. This intensity of local feeling perpetuated the dozens of small states and hindered the development of one unified state.

In the fifteenth century, five powers dominated the Italian peninsula: Venice, Milan, Florence, the Papal States, and the kingdom of Naples (see Map 13.1). The rulers of the city-states—whether despots in Milan, patrician

elitists in Florence, or oligarchs in Venice—governed as monarchs. They crushed urban revolts, levied taxes, killed their enemies, and used massive building programs to employ, and the arts to overawe, the masses.

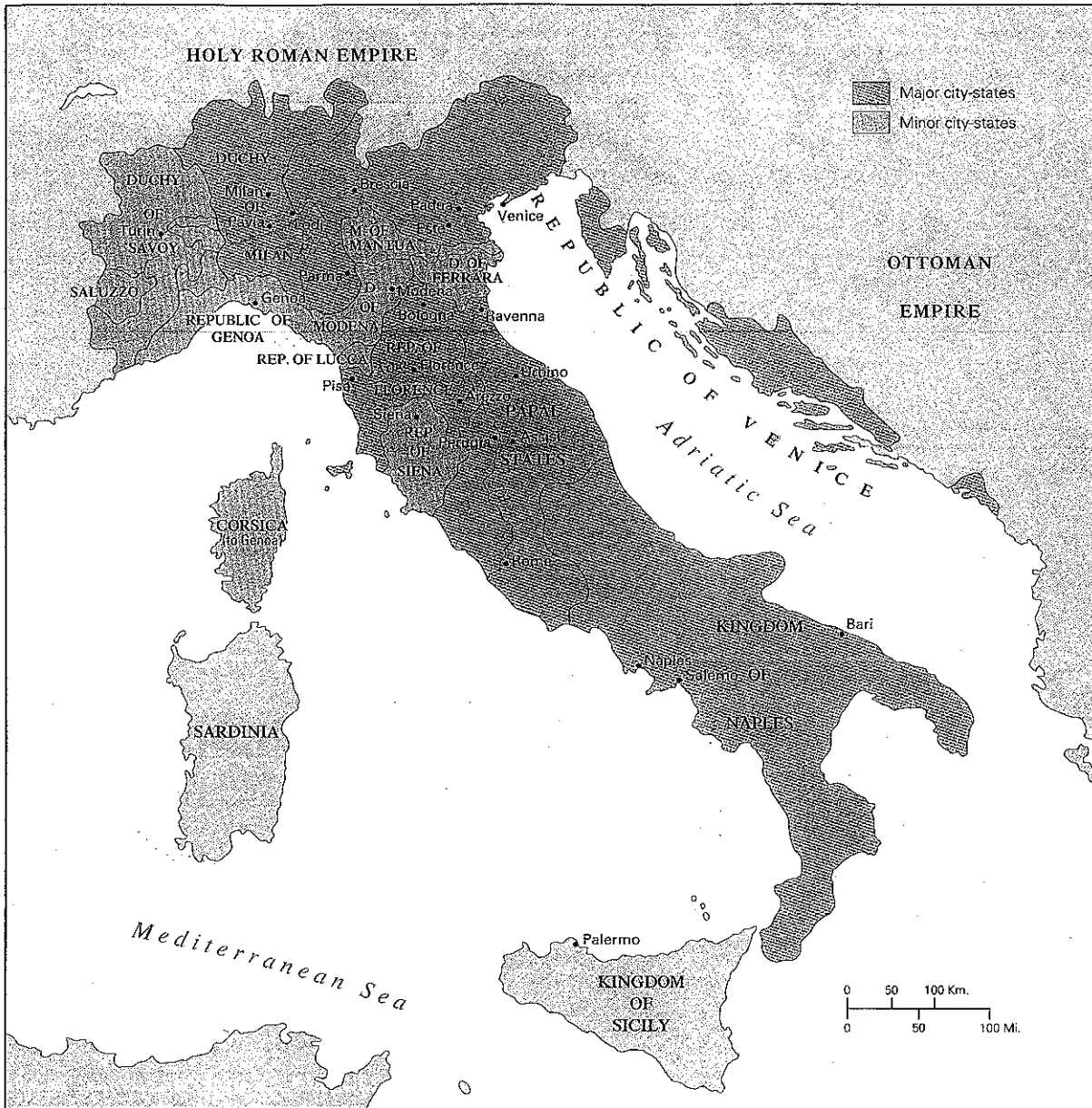
Venice, with its enormous trade and vast colonial empire, ranked as an international power. Though Venice had a sophisticated constitution and was a republic in name, an oligarchy of merchant aristocrats actually ran the city. Milan was also called a republic, but despots of the Sforza family ruled harshly and dominated the smaller cities of the north. Likewise in Florence the form of government was republican, with authority vested in several councils of state. In reality, between 1434 and 1494, power in Florence was held by the great Medici banking family. Though not public officers, Cosimo (1434–1464) and Lorenzo (1469–1492) ruled from behind the scenes.

Central Italy consisted mainly of the Papal States, which during the Babylonian Captivity had come under the sway of important Roman families. Pope Alexander VI (1492–1503), aided militarily and politically by his son Cesare Borgia, reasserted papal authority in the papal lands. Cesare Borgia became the hero of Machiavelli's *The Prince* (see page 431) because he began the work of uniting the peninsula by ruthlessly conquering and exacting total obedience from the principalities making up the Papal States.

South of the Papal States was the kingdom of Naples, consisting of virtually all of southern Italy and, at times, Sicily. The kingdom of Naples had long been disputed by the Aragonese and by the French. In 1435 it passed to Aragon.

The major Italian city-states controlled the smaller ones, such as Siena, Mantua, Ferrara, and Modena, and competed furiously among themselves for territory. The large cities used diplomacy, spies, paid informers, and any other available means to get information that could be used to advance their ambitions. While the states of northern Europe were moving toward centralization and consolidation, the world of Italian politics resembled a jungle where the powerful dominated the weak.

In one significant respect, however, the Italian city-states anticipated future relations among competing European states after 1500. Whenever one Italian state appeared to gain a predominant position within the peninsula, other states combined to establish a *balance of power* against the major threat. In 1450, for example, Venice went to war against Milan in protest against Francesco Sforza's acquisition of the title of duke of Milan. Cosimo de' Medici of Florence, a long-time supporter of a Florentine-Venetian alliance, switched his position and aided Milan. Florence and Naples combined

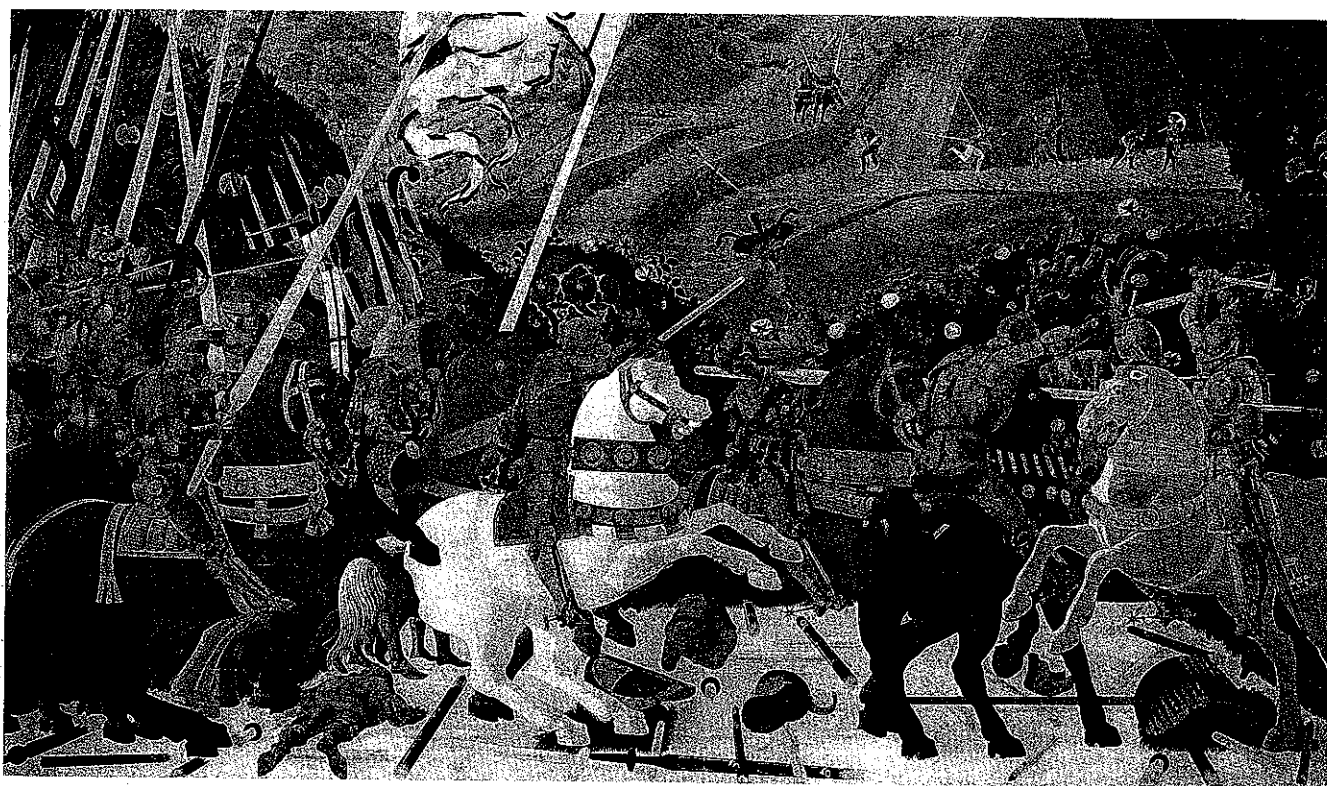


**MAP 13.1 The Italian City-States, ca 1494** In the fifteenth century, the Italian city-states represented great wealth and cultural sophistication. The political divisions of the peninsula invited foreign intervention.

with Milan against powerful Venice and the papacy. In the peace treaty signed at Lodi in 1454, Venice received territories in return for recognizing Sforza's right to the duchy. This pattern of shifting alliances continued until 1494. In the formation of these alliances, Renaissance Italians invented the machinery of modern diplomacy: permanent embassies with resident ambassadors in capi-

tals where political relations and commercial ties needed continual monitoring. The resident ambassador was one of the great achievements of the Italian Renaissance.

At the end of the fifteenth century, Venice, Florence, Milan, and the papacy possessed great wealth and represented high cultural achievement. However, their imperialistic ambitions at one another's expense and their



**Uccello: Battle of San Romano** Fascinated by perspective—the representation of spatial depth or distance on a flat surface—the Florentine artist Paolo Uccello (1397–1475) celebrated the Florentine victory over Siena (1432) in a painting with three scenes. Though a minor battle, it started Florence on the road to domination over smaller nearby states. The painting hung in Lorenzo de' Medici's bedroom. (*National Gallery, London/Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY*)

resulting inability to form a common alliance against potential foreign enemies made Italy an inviting target for invasion. When Florence and Naples entered into an agreement to acquire Milanese territories, Milan called on France for support.

At Florence the French invasion had been predicted by Dominican friar Girolamo Savonarola (1452–1498). In a number of fiery sermons between 1491 and 1494, Savonarola attacked what he called the paganism and moral vice of the city, the undemocratic government of Lorenzo de' Medici, and the corruption of Pope Alexander VI. For a time, Savonarola enjoyed popular support among the ordinary people; he became the religious leader of Florence and as such contributed to the fall of the Medici dynasty. Eventually, however, people tired of his moral denunciations, and he was excommunicated by the pope and executed. Savonarola stands as proof that the common people did not share the worldly outlook of

the commercial and intellectual elite. His career also illustrates the internal instability of Italian cities such as Florence, an instability that invited foreign invasion.

The invasion of Italy in 1494 by the French king Charles VIII (r. 1483–1498) inaugurated a new period in Italian and European power politics. Italy became the focus of international ambitions and the battleground of foreign armies. Charles swept down the peninsula with little opposition, and Florence, Rome, and Naples soon bowed before him. When Piero de' Medici, Lorenzo's son, went to the French camp seeking peace, the Florentines exiled the Medici and restored republican government.

Charles's success simply whetted French appetites. In 1508 his cousin and heir, Louis XII, formed the League of Cambrai with the pope and the German emperor Maximilian for the purpose of stripping rich Venice of its mainland possessions. Pope Leo X (1513–1521) soon found France a dangerous friend and in a new alliance

called on the Spanish and Germans to expel the French from Italy. This anti-French combination was temporarily successful. In 1519 Charles V succeeded his grandfather Maximilian (1493–1519) as Holy Roman emperor. When the French returned to Italy in 1522, a series of conflicts called the Habsburg-Valois Wars (named for the German and French dynasties) began. The battlefield was often Italy.

In the sixteenth century, the political and social life of Italy was upset by the relentless competition for dominance between France and the empire. The Italian cities suffered severely from continual warfare, especially in the frightful sack of Rome in 1527 by imperial forces under Charles V. Thus the failure of the city-states to form some federal system, consolidate, or at least establish a common foreign policy led to the continuation of the centuries-old subjection of the peninsula by outside invaders. Italy was not to achieve unification until 1870.

## **I**ntellectual Hallmarks of the Renaissance

The Renaissance was characterized by self-conscious awareness among fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italians that they were living in a new era. The realization that something new and unique was happening first came to men of letters in the fourteenth century, especially to the poet and humanist Francesco Petrarch (1304–1374). Petrarch thought that he was living at the start of a new age, a period of light following a long night of Gothic gloom. He considered the first two centuries of the Roman Empire to represent the peak in the development of human civilization. Medieval people had believed that they were continuing the glories that had been ancient Rome and had recognized no cultural division between the world of the emperors and their own times. But for Petrarch, the Germanic invasions had caused a sharp cultural break with the glories of Rome and inaugurated what he called the “Dark Ages.” He believed, with many of his contemporaries, that the thousand-year period between the fourth and the fourteenth centuries constituted a barbarian, Gothic, or “middle” age. The sculptors, painters, and writers of the Renaissance spoke contemptuously of their medieval predecessors and identified themselves with the thinkers and artists of Greco-Roman civilization. Petrarch believed that he was witnessing a new golden age of intellectual achievement—a rebirth or, to use the French word that came into English, a *renaissance*. The division of historical time

into periods is often arbitrary and done for the convenience of historians. In terms of the way most people lived and thought, no sharp division exists between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: Some important poets, writers, and artists, however, believed they were living in a new golden age.

The Renaissance also manifested itself in a new attitude toward men, women, and the world—an attitude that may be described as individualism. A humanism characterized by a deep interest in the Latin classics and a deliberate attempt to revive antique lifestyles emerged, as did a bold new secular spirit.

### Individualism

Though the Middle Ages had seen the appearance of remarkable individuals, recognition of such persons was limited. The examples of Saint Augustine in the fifth century and Peter Abelard and Guibert of Nogent in the twelfth—men who perceived themselves as unique and produced autobiographical statements—stand out for that very reason: Christian humility discouraged self-absorption. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, moreover, such characteristically medieval and corporate attachments as the guild and the parish continued to provide strong support for the individual and to exercise great social influence. Yet in the Renaissance, intellectuals, unlike their counterparts in the Middle Ages, developed a new sense of historical distance from earlier periods. A large literature specifically concerned with the nature of individuality emerged. This literature represented the flowering of a distinctly Renaissance individualism.

The Renaissance witnessed the emergence of many distinctive personalities who gloried in their uniqueness. Italians of unusual abilities were self-consciously aware of their singularity and unafraid to be unlike their neighbors; they had enormous confidence in their ability to achieve great things. Leon Battista Alberti (1404–1474), a writer, architect, and mathematician, remarked, “Men can do all things if they will.”<sup>4</sup> Florentine goldsmith and sculptor Benvenuto Cellini (1500–1574) prefaced his *Autobiography* with a declaration:

*My cruel fate hath warr'd with me in vain:  
Life, glory, worth, and all unmeasur'd skill,  
Beauty and grace, themselves in me fulfill  
That many I surpass, and to the best attain.*<sup>5</sup>

Cellini, certain of his genius, wrote so that the whole world might appreciate it.

**Individualism** stressed personality, uniqueness, genius, and full development of one's capabilities and talents.





**Benvenuto Cellini: Saltcellar of Francis I (ca 1539–1543)**  
In gold and enamel, Cellini depicts the Roman sea god, Neptune (with trident, or three-pronged spear), sitting beside a small boat-shaped container holding salt from the sea. Opposite him, a female figure personifying Earth guards pepper, which derives from a plant. Portrayed on the base are the four seasons and the times of day, symbolizing seasonal festivities and daily meal schedules. The grace, poise, and elegance of the figures reflect Mannerism, an artistic style popular during the Italian High Renaissance (1520–1600). (*Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna/The Bridgeman Art Library International Ltd*)

Artist, athlete, painter, scholar, sculptor, whatever—a person's abilities should be stretched until fully realized. Thirst for fame, a driving ambition, and a burning desire for success drove such people to the complete achievement of their potential. The quest for glory was a central component of Renaissance individualism.

### Humanism

In the cities of Italy, especially Rome, civic leaders and the wealthy populace showed phenomenal archaeological zeal for the recovery of manuscripts, statues, and monuments. Pope Nicholas V (1447–1455), a distinguished scholar, planned the Vatican Library for the nine thousand manuscripts he had collected. Pope Sixtus IV (1471–1484) built that library, which remains one of the richest repositories of ancient and medieval documents.

The revival of antiquity also took the form of profound interest in and study of the Latin classics. This feature of

the Renaissance became known as the “new learning,” or simply **humanism**, the term of Florentine rhetorician and historian Leonardo Bruni (1370–1444). The words *humanism* and *humanist* derive ultimately from the Latin *humanitas*, which Cicero used to mean the literary culture needed by anyone who would be considered educated and civilized. Humanists studied the Latin classics to learn what they reveal about human nature. Humanism emphasized human beings, their achievements, interests, and capabilities. Although churchmen supported the new learning, by the later fifteenth century Italian humanism was increasingly a lay phenomenon.

Appreciation for the literary culture of the Romans had never died in the West. Bede and John of Salisbury, for example, had studied and imitated the writings of the ancients. Medieval writers, however, had studied the ancients in order to come to know God. Medieval scholars had interpreted the classics in a Christian sense and had invested the ancients' poems and histories with Christian meaning.

Renaissance humanists, although deeply Christian, approached the classics differently. Whereas medieval writers accepted pagan and classical authors uncritically, Renaissance humanists were skeptical of their authority, conscious of the historical distance separating themselves from the ancients, and fully aware that classical writers often disagreed among themselves. Whereas medieval writers looked to the classics to reveal God, Renaissance humanists studied the classics to understand human nature, and while they fully grasped the moral thought of pagan antiquity, Renaissance humanists viewed humanity from a strongly Christian perspective: men and women were made in the image and likeness of God. For example, in a remarkable essay, *On the Dignity of Man*, the Florentine writer Pico della Mirandola stressed that man possesses great dignity because he was made as Adam in the image of God before the Fall and as Christ after the Resurrection. According to Pico, man's place in the universe is somewhere between the beasts and the angels, but because of the divine image planted in him, there are no limits to what he can accomplish. Humanists rejected classical ideas that were opposed to Christianity. Or they sought through reinterpretation an underlying harmony between the pagan and secular and the Christian faith. The fundamental difference between Renaissance humanists and medieval ones is that the former were more self-conscious about what they were doing, and they stressed the realization of human potential.<sup>6</sup>

The fourteenth- and fifteenth-century humanists loved the language of the classics and considered it superior to the corrupt Latin of the medieval schoolmen. They even-

tually became concerned more about form than about content, more about the way an idea was expressed than about the significance and validity of the idea. Literary humanists of the fourteenth century wrote each other highly stylized letters imitating ancient authors, and they held witty philosophical dialogues in conscious imitation of the Platonic Academy of the fourth century B.C. Renaissance humanists heaped scorn on the "barbaric" Latin style of the medievalists. The leading humanists of the early Renaissance were rhetoricians, seeking effective and eloquent communication, both oral and written.

### Secular Spirit

**Secularism** involves a basic concern with the material world instead of with the eternal world of spirit. A secular way of thinking tends to find the ultimate explanation of everything and the final end of human beings within the limits of what the senses can discover. Even though medieval business people ruthlessly pursued profits and medieval monks fought fiercely over property, the dominant ideals focused on the otherworldly, on life after death. Renaissance people often held strong and deep spiritual interests, but in their increasingly secular society, attention was concentrated on the here and now, often on the acquisition of material things. Church doctrine, relying on Scripture (Leviticus 25:36–37, Psalms 37:26, Luke 11:15), frowned on usury (lending money at interest), but the law had always been difficult to enforce. In the twelfth century, Cistercian monks had been severely criticized for practicing usury. During the Renaissance, the practice became widespread, even acceptable. Considerable wealth derived from interest on loans. The fourteenth and fifteenth centuries witnessed the slow but steady growth of such secularism in Italy.

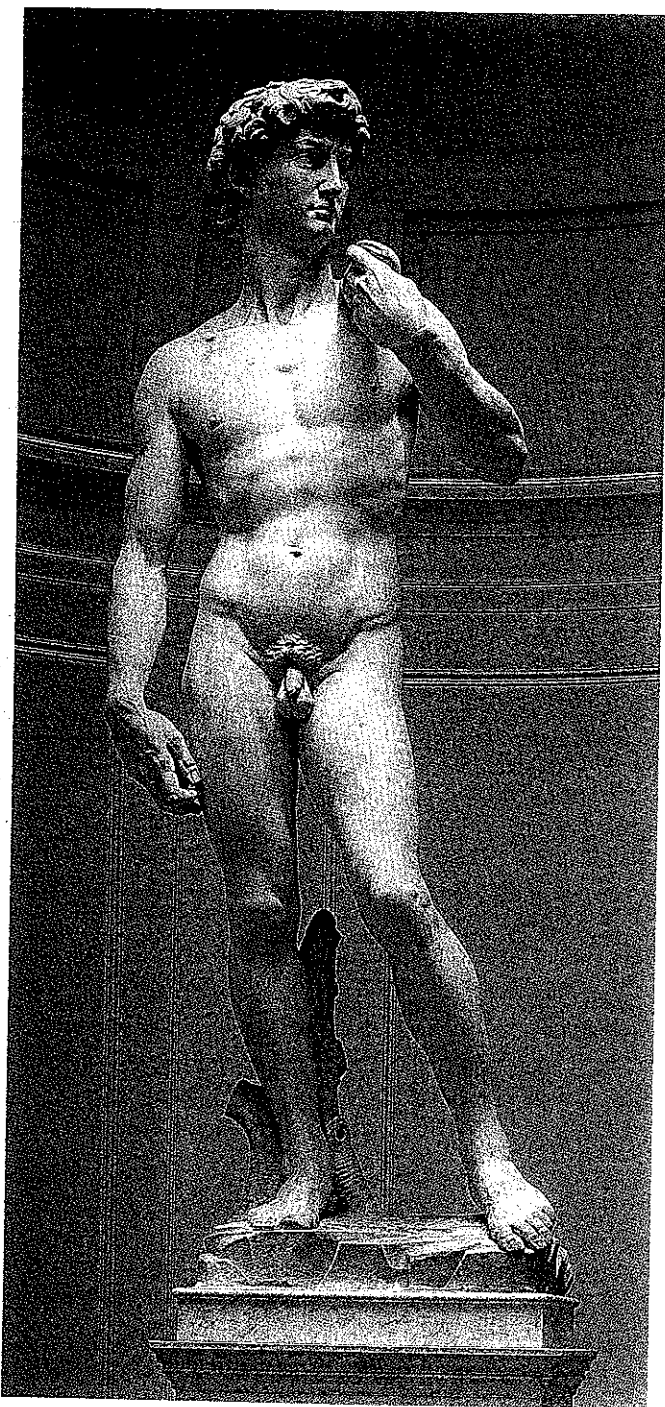
The economic changes and rising prosperity of the Italian cities in the thirteenth century worked a fundamental change in social and intellectual attitudes and values. Worries about shifting rates of interest, shipping routes, personnel costs, and employee relations did not leave much time for thoughts about penance and purgatory. The busy bankers and merchants of the Italian cities calculated ways of making and increasing their money. Such wealth allowed greater material pleasures, a more comfortable life, the leisure time to appreciate and patronize the arts. Money could buy many sensual gratifications, and the rich, social-climbing patricians of Venice, Florence, Genoa, and Rome came to see life more as an opportunity to be enjoyed than as a painful pilgrimage to the City of God.

In *On Pleasure*, humanist Lorenzo Valla (1406–1457) defends the pleasures of the senses as the highest good. Scholars praise Valla as a father of modern historical criticism. His study *On the False Donation of Constantine* (1444) demonstrates by careful textual examination that an anonymous eighth-century document supposedly giving the papacy jurisdiction over vast territories in western Europe was a forgery. Medieval people had accepted the Donation of Constantine as a reality, and the proof that it was an invention weakened the foundations of papal claims to temporal authority. Lorenzo Valla's work exemplifies the application of critical scholarship to old and almost-sacred writings as well as the new secular spirit of the Renaissance.

The tales in *The Decameron* by the Florentine Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–1375), which describe ambitious merchants, lecherous friars, and cuckolded husbands, portray a frankly acquisitive, sensual, and worldly society. Although Boccaccio's figures were stock literary characters, *The Decameron* contains none of the "contempt of the world" theme so pervasive in medieval literature. Renaissance writers justified the accumulation and enjoyment of wealth with references to ancient authors.

Nor did church leaders do much to combat the new secular spirit. In the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, the papal court and the households of the cardinals were just as worldly as those of great urban patricians. Of course, most of the popes and higher church officials had come from the bourgeois aristocracy. Renaissance popes beautified the city of Rome, patronized artists and men of letters, and expended enormous enthusiasm and huge sums of money. A new papal chancellery, begun in 1483 and finished in 1511, stands as one of the architectural masterpieces of the High Renaissance. Pope Julius II (1503–1513) tore down the old Saint Peter's Basilica and began work on the present structure in 1506. Michelangelo's dome for Saint Peter's is still considered his greatest work. Papal interests, which were far removed from spiritual concerns, fostered, rather than discouraged, the new worldly attitude.

The broad mass of the people and the intellectuals and leaders of society remained faithful to the Christian church. Few people questioned the basic tenets of the Christian religion. Italian humanists and their aristocratic patrons were anti-ascetic, anti-Scholastic, and ambivalent, but they were not agnostics or skeptics. The thousands of pious paintings, sculptures, processions, and pilgrimages of the Renaissance period prove that strong religious feeling persisted.



**Michelangelo: David** In 1501 the new republican government of Florence commissioned the twenty-six year old Michelangelo to carve David as a symbol of civic independence and resistance to oligarchical tyranny. Tensed in anticipation of action but certain of victory over his unseen enemy Goliath (1 Samuel 17), this male nude represents the ideal of youthful physical perfection. (*Scala/Art Resource, NY*)

## Art and the Artist

No feature of the Renaissance evokes greater admiration than its artistic masterpieces. The 1400s (*quattrocento*) and 1500s (*cinquecento*) bore witness to a dazzling creativity in painting, architecture, and sculpture. In all the arts, the city of Florence led the way. According to Renaissance art historian Giorgio Vasari (1511–1574), the painter Perugino once asked why it was in Florence and not elsewhere that men achieved perfection in the arts. The first answer he received was, “There were so many good critics there, for the air of the city makes men quick and perceptive and impatient of mediocrity.”<sup>7</sup> But Florence was not the only artistic center. In the period art historians describe as the “High Renaissance” (1500–1527), Rome took the lead. The main characteristics of High Renaissance art—classical balance, harmony, and restraint—are revealed in the masterpieces of Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519), Raphael (1483–1520), and Michelangelo (1475–1564), all of whom worked in Rome.

### Art and Power

In early Renaissance Italy, art manifested corporate power. Powerful urban groups such as guilds or religious confraternities commissioned works of art. The Florentine cloth merchants, for example, delegated Filippo Brunelleschi to build the magnificent dome on the cathedral of Florence and selected Lorenzo Ghiberti to design the bronze doors of the Baptistry. These works represented the merchants’ dominant influence in the community. Corporate patronage was also reflected in the Florentine government’s decision to hire Michelangelo to create the sculpture of David, the great Hebrew hero and king. The subject matter of art through the early fifteenth century, as in the Middle Ages, remained overwhelmingly religious. Religious themes appeared in all media—woodcarvings, painted frescoes, stone sculptures, paintings. As in the Middle Ages, art served an educational purpose. A religious picture or statue was intended to spread a particular doctrine, act as a profession of faith, or recall sinners to a moral way of living.

Increasingly in the later fifteenth century, individuals and oligarchs, rather than corporate groups, sponsored works of art. Patrician merchants and bankers, popes and princes, supported the arts as a means of glorifying themselves and their families. Vast sums were spent on family chapels, frescoes, religious panels, and tombs. Writing about 1470, Florentine oligarch Lorenzo de’ Medici declared that over the previous thirty-five years his family



**Andrea Mantegna: Adoration of the Magi (ca 1495–1505)** Applying his study of ancient Roman relief sculpture, and elaborating on a famous scriptural text (Matthew 2:1), Mantegna painted for the private devotion of the Gonzaga family of Mantua this scene of the Three Kings coming to recognize the divinity of Christ. The Three Kings represent the entire world—that is, the three continents known to medieval Europeans: Europe, Asia, and Africa. They also symbolize the three stages of life: youth, maturity, and old age. Here Melchior, the oldest, his large cranium symbolizing wisdom, personifies Europe. He offers gold in a Chinese porcelain cup from the Ming Dynasty. Balthazar, with an olive complexion and dark beard, stands for Asia and maturity. He presents frankincense in a stunning vessel of Turkish tombac ware. Caspar, representing Africa and youth, gives myrrh in an urn of striped marble. The child responds with a blessing. The black background brings out the rich colors. (*The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles. Mantegna, Andrea, Adoration of the Magi, ca 1495–1505, distemper on linen, 54.6 × 70.7 cm [85.PA.417]*)

had spent the astronomical sum of 663,755 gold florins for artistic and architectural commissions. Yet “I think it casts a brilliant light on our estate [public reputation] and it seems to me that the monies were well spent and I am very pleased with this.” Powerful men wanted to exalt themselves, their families, and their offices. A magnificent style of living, enriched by works of art, served to prove the greatness and the power of the despot or oligarch.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to power, art reveals changing patterns of consumption in Renaissance Italy. “Consumer habits introduced into economic life a creative and dynamic process for growth and change that was fundamental to the devel-

opment of the West.”<sup>9</sup> If modern consumerism has its roots in the eighteenth century, the latter period’s consumer practices can be traced to the Italian Renaissance.

In the rural world of the Middle Ages, society had been organized for war. Men of wealth spent their money on military gear—swords, armor, horses, crenelated castles, towers, family compounds—all of which represent offensive or defensive warfare. As Italian nobles settled in towns (see page 417), they adjusted to an urban culture. Rather than employing knights for warfare, cities hired mercenaries. Expenditure on military hardware declined. For the rich merchant or the noble recently arrived from

the countryside, the urban palace represented the greatest outlay of cash. It was his chief luxury, and although a private dwelling, the palace implied grandeur.<sup>10</sup> Within the palace, the merchant-prince's chamber, or bedroom, where he slept and received his intimate guests, was the most important room. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, a large, intricately carved wooden bed, a chest, and perhaps a bench served as its sole decorations. The chest held the master's most precious goods—silver, tapestries, jewelry, clothing. Other rooms, even in palaces of fifteen to twenty rooms, were very sparsely furnished. As the fifteenth century advanced and wealth increased, other rooms were gradually furnished with carved chests, tables, benches, chairs, tapestries for the walls, paintings (an innovation), and sculptural decorations, and a private chapel was added. By the late sixteenth century, the Strozzi banking family of Florence spent more on household goods than on anything else except food; the value of those furnishings was three times that of their silver and jewelry.<sup>11</sup>

After the palace itself, the private chapel within the palace symbolized the largest expenditure. Equipped with the ecclesiastical furniture—tabernacles, chalices, thuribles, and other liturgical utensils—and decorated with religious scenes, the chapel served as the center of

the household's religious life and its cult of remembrance of the dead. In fifteenth-century Florence, only the Medici had a private chapel, but by the late sixteenth century, most wealthy Florentine families had private chapels. Since the merchant banker or prince appointed the chaplain, usually a younger son of the family, religious power passed into private hands.<sup>12</sup>

As the fifteenth century advanced, the subject matter of art became steadily more secular. The study of classical texts brought deeper understanding of ancient ideas. Classical themes and motifs, such as the lives and loves of pagan gods and goddesses, figured increasingly in painting and sculpture. Religious topics, such as the Annunciation of the Virgin and the Nativity, remained popular among both patrons and artists, but frequently the patron had himself and his family portrayed. People were conscious of their physical uniqueness and wanted their individuality immortalized. Paintings were also means of displaying wealth.

The content and style of Renaissance art were decidedly different from those of the Middle Ages. The individual portrait emerged as a distinct artistic genre. In the fifteenth century, members of the newly rich middle class often had themselves painted in a scene of romantic chivalry or courtly society. Rather than reflecting a spiri-

**Renaissance Wedding Chest (Tuscany, late fifteenth century)** A wedding chest was a gift from the groom's family to the bride. Appreciated more for their decorative value than for practical storage purposes, these chests were prominently displayed in people's homes. This 37" × 47" × 28" chest is carved with scenes from classical mythology. (*Philadelphia Museum of Art. Purchased with the Joseph E. Temple Fund*)



tual ideal, as medieval painting and sculpture tended to do, Renaissance portraits mirrored reality. The Florentine painter Giotto (1276–1337) led the way in the use of realism; his treatment of the human body and face replaced the formal stiffness and artificiality that had for so long characterized representation of the human body. The sculptor Donatello (1386–1466) probably exerted the greatest influence of any Florentine artist before Michelangelo. His many statues express an appreciation of the incredible variety of human nature. Whereas medieval artists had depicted the nude human body only in a spiritualized and moralizing context, Donatello revived the classical figure, with its balance and self-awareness. The short-lived Florentine Masaccio (1401–1428), sometimes called the father of modern painting, inspired a new style characterized by great realism, narrative power, and remarkably effective use of light and dark. As important as realism was the new “international style,” so called because of the wandering careers of influential artists, the close communications and rivalry of princely courts, and the increased trade in works of art. Rich color, decorative detail, curvilinear rhythms, and swaying forms characterized the international style. As the term *international* implies, this style was European, not merely Italian.

Narrative artists depicted the body in a more scientific and natural manner. The female figure is voluptuous and sensual. The male body, as in Michelangelo's *David* and *The Last Judgment*, is strong and heroic. Renaissance glorification of the human body revealed the secular spirit of the age. Filippo Brunelleschi (1377–1446) and Piero della Francesca (1420–1492) seem to have pioneered *perspective* in painting, the linear representation of distance and space on a flat surface. *The Last Supper* by Leonardo da Vinci, with its stress on the tension between Christ and the disciples, is an incredibly subtle psychological interpretation.

### The Status of the Artist

In the Renaissance, the social status of the artist improved. Whereas the lower-middle-class medieval master mason had been viewed in the same light as a mechanic, the Renaissance artist was considered a free intellectual worker. Artists did not produce unsolicited pictures or statues for the general public; that could mean loss of status. They usually worked on commission from a powerful prince. The artist's reputation depended on the support of powerful patrons, and through them some artists and architects achieved not only economic security but also very great wealth.

Lorenzo Ghiberti's salary of 200 florins a year compared very favorably with that of the head of the city government, who earned 500 florins. Moreover, at a time when a person could live in a princely fashion on 300 ducats a year, Leonardo da Vinci was making 2,000 annually.<sup>13</sup>

Renaissance society respected and rewarded the distinguished artist. In 1537 the prolific letter writer, humanist, and satirizer of princes Pietro Aretino (1492–1556) wrote to Michelangelo while he was painting the Sistine Chapel:

*To the Divine Michelangelo:*

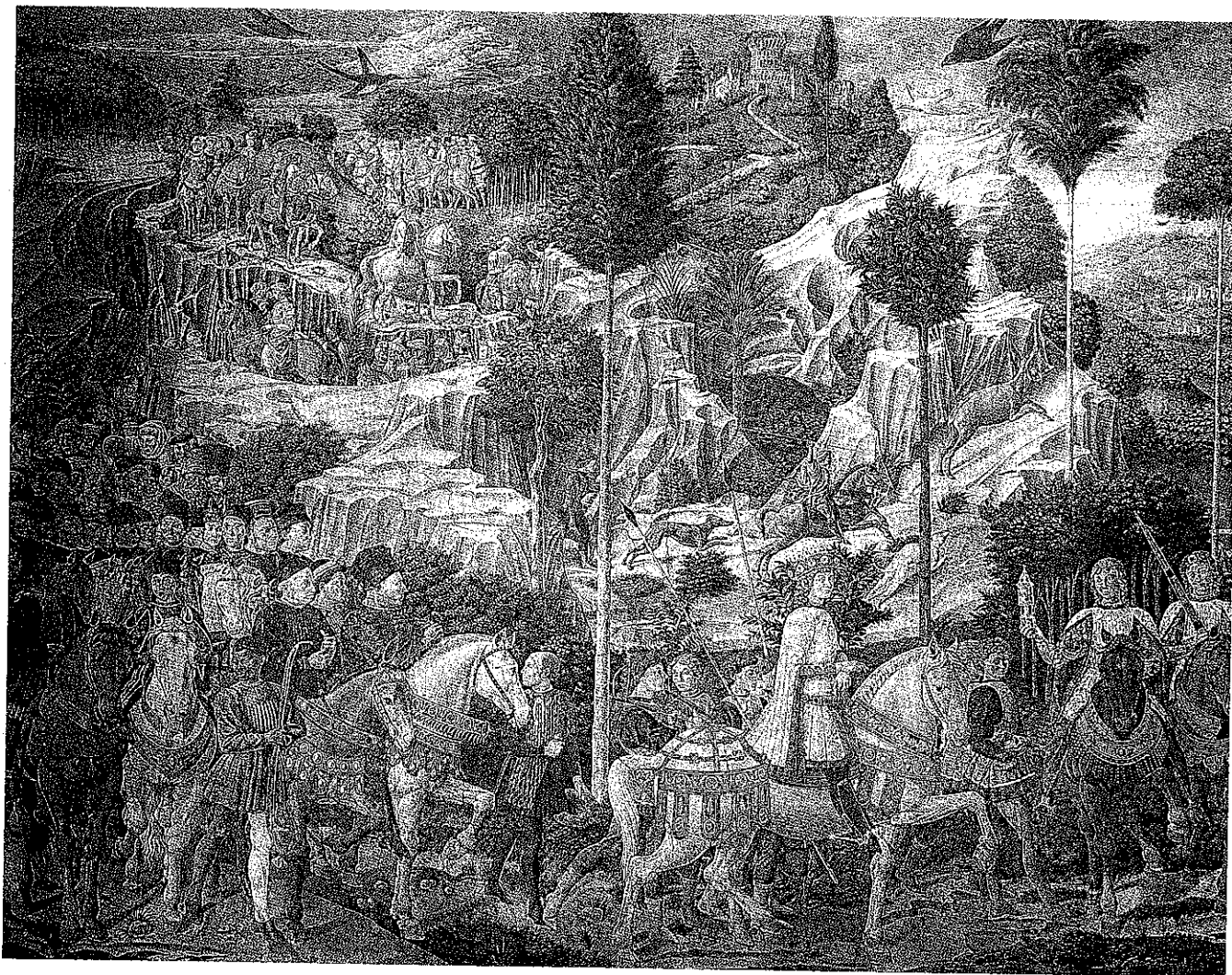
*Sir, just as it is disgraceful and sinful to be unmindful of God so it is reprehensible and dishonourable for any man of discerning judgment not to honour you as a brilliant and venerable artist whom the very stars use as a target at which to shoot the rival arrows of their favour. . . . It is surely my duty to honour you with this salutation, since the world has many kings but only one Michelangelo.*<sup>14</sup>

When Holy Roman Emperor Charles V (r. 1519–1556) visited the workshop of the great Titian (1477–1576) and stooped to pick up the artist's dropped paintbrush, the emperor was demonstrating that the patron himself was honored in the act of honoring the artist.

Renaissance artists were not only aware of their creative power; they also boasted about it. Describing his victory over five others, including Brunelleschi, in the competition to design the bronze doors of Florence's Baptistery, Ghiberti exulted, “The palm of victory was conceded to me by all the experts and by all my fellow-competitors. By universal consent and without a single exception the glory was conceded to me.”<sup>15</sup> Some medieval painters and sculptors had signed their works; Renaissance artists almost universally did so, and many of them incorporated self-portraits, usually as bystanders, in their paintings.

The Renaissance, in fact, witnessed the birth of the concept of the artist as genius. In the Middle Ages, people believed that only God created, albeit through individuals; the medieval conception recognized no particular value in artistic originality. Renaissance artists and humanists came to think that a work of art was the deliberate creation of a unique personality who transcended traditions, rules, and theories. A genius had a peculiar gift, which ordinary laws should not inhibit. Cosimo de' Medici described a painter, because of his genius, as “divine,” implying that the artist shared in the powers of God. The word *divine* was widely applied to Michelangelo. (See the feature “Individuals in Society: Leonardo da Vinci.”)

But students must guard against interpreting Italian Renaissance culture in twenty-first-century democratic



**Benozzo Gozzoli: Journey of the Magi** Few Renaissance paintings better illustrate art in the service of the princely court, in this case the Medici, than this one, commissioned by Piero de' Medici to adorn his palace chapel. Everything in this fresco—the large crowd, the feathers and diamonds adorning many of the personages, the black servant in front—serves to flaunt the power and wealth of the House of Medici. There is nothing especially religious about it; the painting could more appropriately be called “Journey of the Medici.” The artist has discreetly placed himself in the crowd; the name Benozzo is embroidered on his cap. (*Scala/Art Resource, NY*)

terms. The culture of the Renaissance was that of a small mercantile elite, a business patriciate with aristocratic pretensions. Renaissance culture did not directly affect the broad middle classes, let alone the vast urban proletariat. A small, highly educated minority of literary humanists and artists created the culture of and for an exclusive elite. The Renaissance maintained a gulf between the learned minority and the uneducated multitude that has survived for many centuries.

## Social Change

Renaissance ideals permeated educational theory and practice and political thought. The era's most stunning technological invention, printing, affected many forms of social life. Renaissance culture witnessed a shift in the status and experience of women. Numbers of slaves also played a role in Renaissance society.

# Individuals in Society



## Leonardo da Vinci

What makes a genius? An infinite capacity for taking pains? A deep curiosity about an extensive variety of subjects? A divine spark as manifested by talents that far exceed the norm? Or is it just “one percent inspiration and ninety-nine percent perspiration,” as Thomas Edison said? By whatever criteria, Leonardo da Vinci was one of the greatest geniuses in the history of the Western world.

He was born in Vinci, near Florence, the illegitimate son of Caterina, a local peasant girl, and Ser Piero da Vinci, a notary public. Caterina later married another native of Vinci. When Ser Piero's marriage to Donna Albrussia produced no children, they took in Leonardo, who remained with them until Ser Piero secured Leonardo's apprenticeship with the painter and sculptor Andrea del Verrocchio. In 1472, when Leonardo was just twenty years old, he was listed as a master in Florence's “Company of Artists.”

Leonardo contributed to the modern concept of the artist as an original thinker and as a special kind of human being: an isolated figure with exceptional creative powers. Leonardo's portrait *Ginevra de' Benci* anticipates his most famous portrait, *Mona Lisa*, with the enigmatic smile that Giorgio Vasari described as “so pleasing that it seemed divine rather than human.” Leonardo's experimental method of fresco painting of *The Last Supper* caused the picture to deteriorate rapidly, but it has been called “the most revered painting in the world.” To the annoyance of his patrons, none of these paintings was ever completed to Leonardo's satisfaction. For example, *The Last Supper* was left unfinished because he could not find a model for the face of Christ that would evoke the spiritual depth he felt it deserved.

Leonardo once said that “a painter is not admirable unless he is universal.” He left notes and plans on drawing, painting, sculpture, music, architecture, town planning, optics, astronomy, biology, zoology, mathematics, and various branches of engineering, such as a model for a submarine, designs for tank warfare, and cranes for dredging. These drafts suggest the astonishing versatility of his mind. One authority has said that Leonardo “saw art from the scientific point of view and science from the artist's point of view.”

Vasari described Leonardo as a handsome man with a large body and physical grace, a “sparkling conversationalist” talented at singing while accompanying himself on the lyre. According to Vasari, “his genius was so

wonderfully inspired by God, his powers of expression so powerfully fed by a willing memory and intellect . . . that his arguments confounded the most formidable critics.”

In a famous essay, the Viennese psychiatrist Sigmund Freud argued that Leonardo was a homosexual who sublimated, pouring his sexual energy into his art. Freud wrote that it is doubtful that Leonardo ever touched a woman or even had an intimate spiritual relationship with one. Although as a master artist he surrounded himself with handsome young men and even had a long emotional relationship with one, Francesco Melzi, the evidence suggests that his male relationships never resulted in sexual activity. On a page of his *Codex Atlanticus*, which includes his sketch of the Florentine navigator Amerigo Vespucci, Leonardo wrote, “Intellectual passion drives out sensuality.” For Freud, Leonardo transferred his psychic energy into artistic and scientific study. This thesis has attracted much attention, but no one has refuted it.

Leonardo worked in Milan for the despot Ludovico Sforza, planning a gigantic equestrian statue in honor of Ludovico's father, Duke Francesco Sforza. The clay model collapsed, and only notes survived. Leonardo also worked as a military engineer for Cesare Borgia (see page 418). In 1516 he accepted King Francis I's invitation to France. At the French court and in the presence of his faithful companion Francesco Melzi, Leonardo died in the arms of the king.



Leonardo da Vinci, *Lady with an Ermine*. The whiteness of the ermine's fur symbolizes purity. (Czartoryski Museum, Krakow/The Bridgeman Art Library International Ltd)

### Questions for Analysis

1. How would you explain Leonardo's genius?
2. Consider sublimation as a source of artistic and scientific creativity.

Sources: Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Artists*, vol. 1, trans. G. Bull (London: Penguin Books, 1965); S. B. Nuland, *Leonardo da Vinci* (New York: Lipper/Viking, 2000); Sigmund Freud, *Leonardo da Vinci: A Study in Psychosexuality* (New York: Random House, 1947).



### Education and Political Thought

One of the central preoccupations of the humanists was education and moral behavior. Humanists poured out treatises, often in the form of letters, on the structure and goals of education and the training of rulers. In one of the earliest systematic programs for the young, Peter Paul Vergerio (1370–1444) wrote *Ubertinus*, the ruler of Carrara:

*For the education of children is a matter of more than private interest; it concerns the State, which indeed regards the right training of the young as, in certain aspects, within its proper sphere. . . . Tutors and comrades alike should be chosen from amongst those likely to bring out the best qualities, to attract by good example, and to repress the first signs of evil. . . . Above all, respect for Divine ordinances is of the deepest importance; it should be inculcated from the earliest years. Reverence towards elders and parents is an obligation closely akin.*

*We call those studies liberal which are worthy of a free man; those studies by which we attain and practice virtue and wisdom.*<sup>16</sup>

Part of Vergerio's treatise specifies subjects for the instruction of young men in public life: history teaches virtue by examples from the past, ethics focuses on virtue itself, and rhetoric or public speaking trains for eloquence.

No book on education had broader influence than Baldassare Castiglione's *The Courtier* (1528). This treatise sought to train, discipline, and fashion the young man into the courtly ideal, the gentleman. According to Castiglione, the educated man of the upper class should have a broad background in many academic subjects, and his spiritual and physical as well as intellectual capabilities should be trained. The courtier should have easy familiarity with dance, music, and the arts. Castiglione envisioned a man who could compose a sonnet, wrestle, sing a song and accompany himself on an instrument, ride expertly, solve difficult mathematical problems, and, above all, speak and write eloquently.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, *The Courtier* was widely read. It influenced the social mores and patterns of conduct of elite groups in Renaissance and early modern Europe. The courtier became the model of the European gentleman.

In the cities of Renaissance Italy, well-to-do girls received an education similar to boys'. Young ladies learned their letters and studied the classics. Many read Greek as well as Latin, knew the poetry of Ovid and Virgil, and could speak one or two "modern" languages,

such as French or Spanish. In this respect, Renaissance humanism represented a real educational advance for women. Some women, though a small minority among humanists, acquired great learning and fame. (See the feature "Listening to the Past: Christine de Pisan" on pages 412–413.) In the later sixteenth century, at least twenty-five women published books in Italy, Sofonisba Anguissola (1530–1625) and Artemisia Gentileschi (1593–1653) achieved international renown for their paintings, and Isabella Andreini (1562–1604) enjoyed a reputation as the greatest actress of her day.

Laura Cereta (1469–1499) illustrates the successes and failures of educated Renaissance women. Educated by her father, who was a member of the governing elite of Brescia in Lombardy, she learned languages, philosophy, theology, and mathematics. She also gained self-confidence and a healthy respect for her own potential. By the age of fifteen, when she married, her literary career was already launched, as her letters to several cardinals attest. For Laura Cereta, however, as for all educated women of the period, the question of marriage forced the issue: she could choose a husband, family, and full participation in social life or study and withdrawal from the world. Marriage brought domestic responsibilities and usually prevented women from fulfilling their scholarly potential. Although Cereta chose marriage, she was widowed at eighteen, and she spent the remaining twelve years of her life in study. But she had to bear the envy of other women and the hostility of men who felt threatened. In response, Cereta condemned "empty women, who strive for no good but exist to adorn themselves. . . . These women of majestic pride, fantastic coiffures, outlandish ornament, and necks bound with gold or pearls bear the glittering symbols of their captivity to men." For Laura Cereta, women's inferiority was derived not from the divine order of things but from women themselves: "For knowledge is not given as a gift, but through study. . . . The free mind, not afraid of labor, presses on to attain the good."<sup>17</sup> Despite Cereta's faith in women's potential, men frequently believed that in becoming learned, a woman violated nature and thus ceased to be a woman.

Laura Cereta was a prodigy. Ordinary girls of the urban upper middle class, in addition to a classical education, received some training in painting, music, and dance. What were they to do with this training? They were to be gracious, affable, charming—in short, decorative. So although Renaissance women were better educated than their medieval counterparts, their education prepared them for the social functions of the home. An educated

woman was supposed to know how to attract artists and literati to her husband's court and how to grace her husband's household, whereas an educated man was supposed to know how to rule and participate in public affairs.

No Renaissance book on any topic, however, has been more widely read and studied in all the centuries since its publication (1513) than the short political treatise *The Prince*, by Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527). The subject of *The Prince* is political power: how the ruler should gain, maintain, and increase it. Machiavelli implicitly addresses the question of the citizen's relationship to the state. As a good humanist, he explores the problems of human nature and concludes that human beings are selfish and out to advance their own interests. This pessimistic view of humanity led him to maintain that the prince may have to manipulate the people in any way he finds necessary:

*For a man who, in all respects, will carry out only his professions of good, will be apt to be ruined amongst so many who are evil. A prince therefore who desires to maintain himself must learn to be not always good, but to be so or not as necessity may require.*<sup>18</sup>

The prince should combine the cunning of a fox with the ferocity of a lion to achieve his goals. Asking rhetorically whether it is better for a ruler to be loved or feared, Machiavelli writes: "It will naturally be answered that it would be desirable to be both the one and the other; but as it is difficult to be both at the same time, it is much more safe to be feared than to be loved, when you have to choose between the two."<sup>19</sup>

Medieval political theory had derived ultimately from Saint Augustine's view that the state arose as a consequence of Adam's fall and people's propensity to sin. The test of good government was whether it provided justice, law, and order. Political theorists and theologians from Alcuin to Marsiglio of Padua had stressed the way government *ought* to be; they had set high moral and Christian standards for the ruler's conduct.

Machiavelli maintained that the ruler should be concerned not with the way things ought to be but with the way things actually are. The sole test of a "good" government is whether it is effective, whether the ruler increases his power. Machiavelli did not advocate amoral behavior, but he believed that political action cannot be restricted by moral considerations. While amoral action might be the most effective approach in a given situation, he did not argue for generally amoral, rather than moral, behavior. Nevertheless, on the basis of a crude interpretation of *The Prince*, the word *Machiavellian* en-

tered the language as a synonym for the politically devious, corrupt, and crafty, indicating actions in which the end justifies the means. The ultimate significance of Machiavelli rests on two ideas: first, that one permanent social order reflecting God's will cannot be established, and second, that politics has its own laws and ought to be a science.<sup>20</sup>

### The Printed Word

Sometime in the thirteenth century, paper money and playing cards from China reached the West. They were *block-printed*—that is, Chinese characters or pictures were carved into a wooden block, the block was inked, and the words or illustrations were transferred to paper. Since each word, phrase, or picture was on a separate block, this method of reproduction was extraordinarily expensive and time-consuming.

Around 1454, probably through the combined efforts of three men—Johann Gutenberg, Johann Fust, and Peter Schöffer, all experimenting at Mainz—movable type came into being. The mirror image of each letter (rather than entire words or phrases) was carved in relief on a small block. Individual letters, easily movable, were put together to form words; words separated by blank spaces formed lines of type; and lines of type were brought together to make up a page. Since letters could be arranged into any format, an infinite variety of texts could be printed by reusing and rearranging pieces of type.

By the middle of the fifteenth century, acquiring paper was no problem. The knowledge of paper manufacture had originated in China, and the Arabs introduced it to the West in the twelfth century. Europeans quickly learned that durable paper was far less expensive than the vellum (calfskin) and parchment (sheepskin) on which medieval scribes had relied for centuries.

The effects of the invention of movable-type printing were not felt overnight. Nevertheless, within a half century of the publication of Gutenberg's Bible of 1456, movable type had brought about radical changes. Printing transformed both the private and the public lives of Europeans (see Map 13.2). Governments that "had employed the cumbersome methods of manuscripts to communicate with their subjects switched quickly to print to announce declarations of war; publish battle accounts, promulgate treaties or argue disputed points in pamphlet form. Theirs was an effort 'to win the psychological war.'" Printing made propaganda possible, emphasizing differences between opposing groups, such as Crown and nobility, church and state. These differences laid the

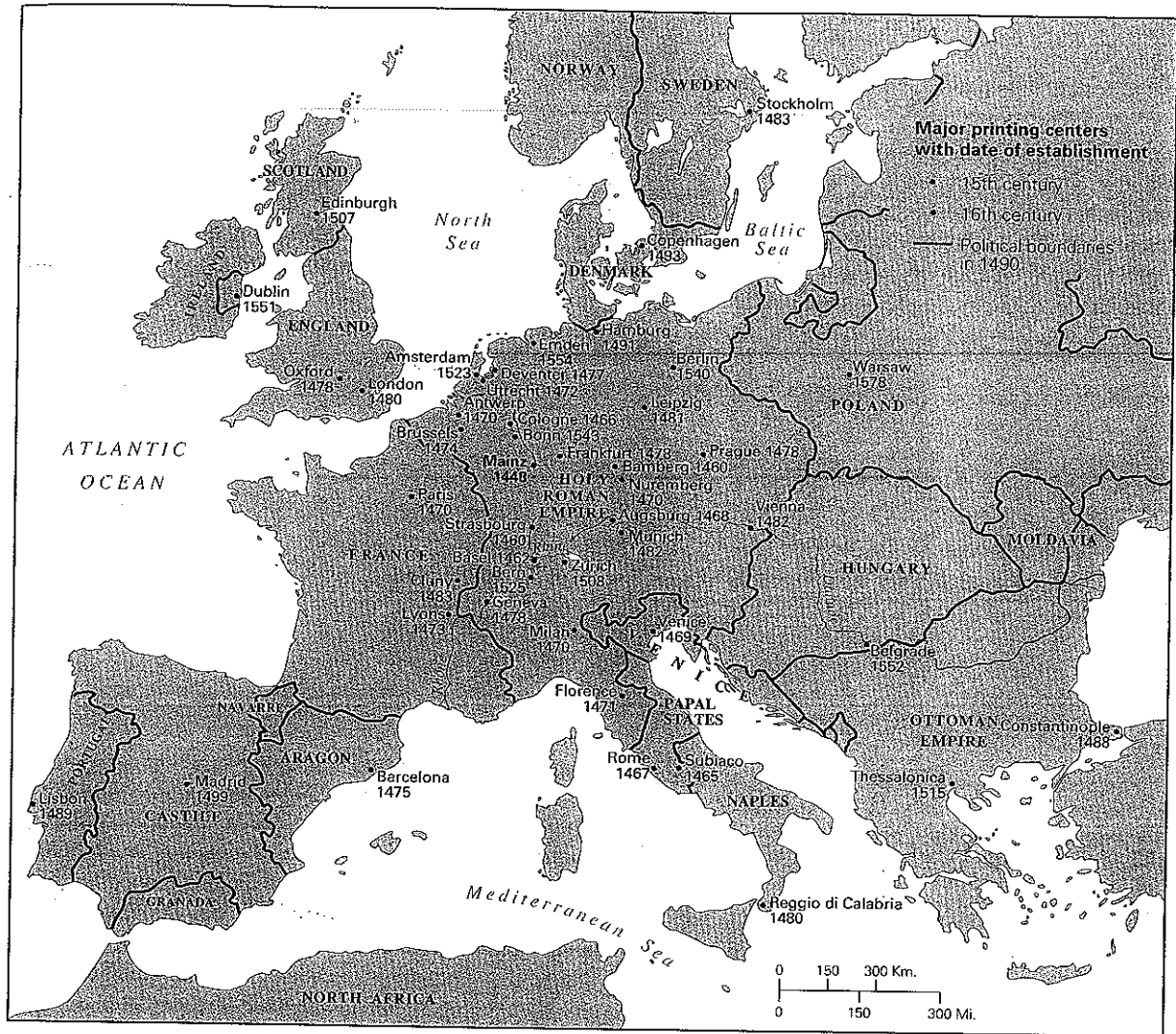


**The Print Shop** Sixteenth-century printing involved a division of labor. Two persons (*left*) at separate benches set the pieces of type. Another (*center, rear*) inks the chase (or locked plate containing the set type). Yet another (*right*) operates the press, which prints the sheets. The boy removes the printed pages and sets them to dry. Meanwhile, a man carries in fresh paper on his head. (*Giraudon/Art Resource, NY*)

basis for the formation of distinct political parties. Printed materials reached an invisible public, allowing silent individuals to join causes and groups of individuals widely separated by geography to form a common identity; this new group consciousness could compete with older, localized loyalties.<sup>21</sup>

Printing also stimulated the literacy of laypeople and eventually came to have a deep effect on their private lives. Although most of the earliest books and pamphlets dealt with religious subjects, students, housewives, businessmen, and upper- and middle-class people sought books on all subjects. Printers responded with moralizing, medical,

practical, and travel manuals. Pornography as well as piety assumed new forms. For example, satirist Pietro Aretino (1492–1556) used the shock of sex in pornography as a vehicle to criticize: his *Sonnetti Lussuriosi* (1527) and *Ragionamenti* (1534–1536), sonnets accompanying sixteen engravings of as many sexual positions, attacked princely court life, humanist education, and false clerical piety.<sup>22</sup> Broadsides and flysheets allowed great public festivals, religious ceremonies, and political events to be experienced vicariously by the stay-at-home. Since books and other printed materials were read aloud to illiterate listeners, print bridged the gap between written and oral cultures.



**MAP 13.2 The Growth of Printing in Europe** Although many commercial and academic centers developed printing technology, the press at Venice, employing between four hundred and five hundred people and producing one-eighth of all printed books, was by far the largest in Europe.

**Clocks**

The English word *quantification* was first used in 1840, but five centuries earlier, before the invention of movable type, Europeans learned how to quantify, or measure, time with the mechanical clock. Who invented the clock remains a subject of scientific debate. Between A.D. 700 and 1000, Arabs relied on the sundial, using their knowledge of astronomy to correct for the varying motion of the sun during the course of the year. The Arabs knew that the length of daylight, caused by the changing dis-

tance between the earth and the sun as the earth moves in elliptical orbit, varies with the seasons. Chinese knowledge of mechanical clocks may have allowed Gerbert, later Pope Sylvester II (999–1003), to build the first mechanical clock in the West.

The English word *clock* resembles the French *cloche* and the German *Glocke*, all meaning “bells.” In monastic houses, bells determined the times for the recitation of the Hours, the Work of God. Bells also paced the life of the rural world nearby, but country people needed only approximate times—dawn, noon, sunset—for their work.

The measurement of time played a much more urgent role for city people.

Buying and selling goods had initiated city people into the practice of quantification: they needed precise measurement of the day's hours. City people's time was what the American polymath Benjamin Franklin later called it: money. In the Italian cities, clocks must have been widespread, since the poet Dante, writing about 1320, took them for granted. Mechanical clocks, usually installed on the cathedral or town church, were in general use in Germany by the 1330s, in England by the 1370s, and in France by the 1380s.<sup>23</sup>

Clocks contributed to the development of a mentality that conceived of the universe in visual and quantitative terms. Measuring the world brought not only understanding of it but the urge to control it. The mechanical clock enabled Europeans to divide time into equal hours, allowing the working day to be fixed in both winter and summer. The Maya in Central America and the Chinese

had theoretical knowledge of time, but Europeans put that knowledge to practical use. Along with cannon and printing, clocks gave Europeans technological advantages over other peoples.<sup>24</sup>

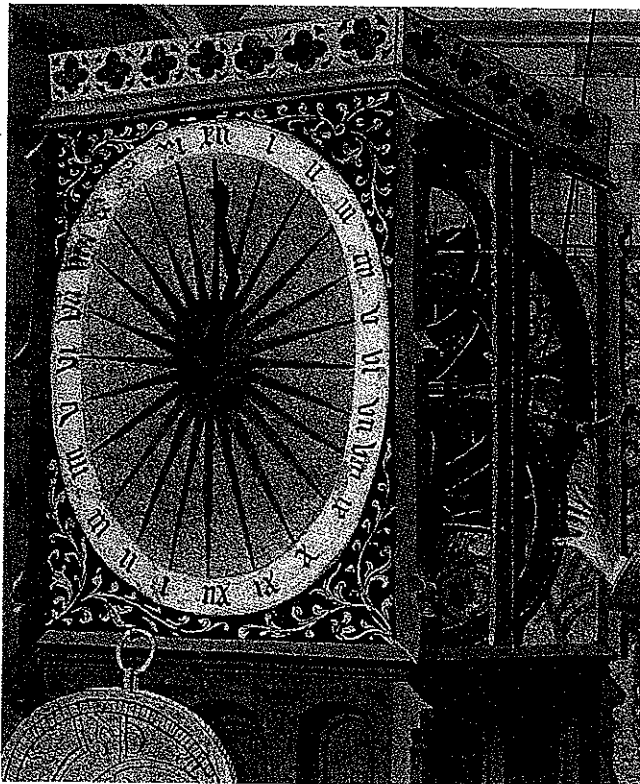
### Women and Work

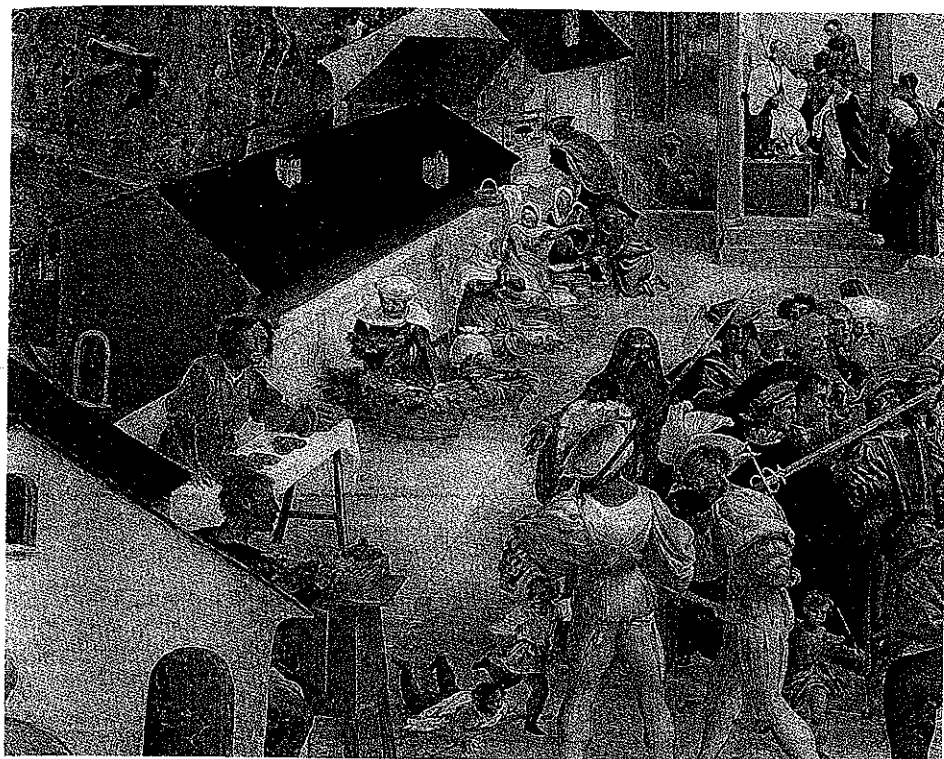
We know relatively little about the lives of individual women of the middle and working classes in the period from about 1300 to 1600. Most women married and thus carried all the domestic responsibilities of the home. They also frequently worked outside the home.

In the Venetian Arsenal, the state-controlled dock and shipbuilding area (the largest single industrial plant in Europe and the builder of the biggest fleet) women made the ships' sails. Women were heavily involved in the Florentine textile industry, weaving cloth and reeling and winding silk. In the 1560s, a woman named Suzanne Erkur managed the imperial silver mint at Kutná Hora in Bohemia. Women conducted the ferry service across the Rhône River at Lyons. Throughout Europe rural women assisted fathers and husbands in the many agricultural tasks, and urban women helped in shops and businesses. Widows often ran their husbands' establishments. Tens of thousands of women worked as midwives, maids, cooks, laundresses, and household servants. From the port city of Dubrovnik (formerly Ragusa) on the Dalmatian coast came tens of thousands of female slaves to enter domestic service in upper-class households throughout Italy<sup>25</sup> (see page 438).

What of women of the upper classes? During the Renaissance, the status of upper-class women declined. In terms of the kind of work they performed, their access to property and political power, and their role in shaping the outlook of their society, women in the Renaissance ruling classes generally had less power than comparable women in the feudal age. As mentioned earlier (see page 430), well-to-do girls generally received an education, but even so, men everywhere held the conviction that a woman's attention should be focused on the domestic affairs of family life. The Italian humanist and polymath Leon Battista Alberti (1404–1472), discussing morality in his *On the Family*, stressed that a wife's role should be restricted to the orderliness of the household, food and the serving of meals, the education of children, and the supervision of servants. The Spanish humanist Juan Luis Vives (1492–1540), in his *Instruction of the Christian Woman*, held that a woman's sphere should be the home, not the public arena, where she might compete with men. The English statesman Sir Thomas Smith (1513–1577) wrote in *The English Commonwealth* that women were "those whom nature hath made to keepe home and

**Mechanical Clock** Slowly falling weights provide the force that pushes the figures' arms to strike the bells on the quarter-hour in this sixteenth-century German clock. The sound of a machine now marked time. (*Bibliothèque royale Albert 1er, Brussels*)





**Working Women** Women did virtually every kind of work in Renaissance Europe. They often sold food, cloth, hand-made jewelry, trinkets, and other merchandise in the town marketplace, just as many women in developing countries do today. (Scala/Art Resource, NY)

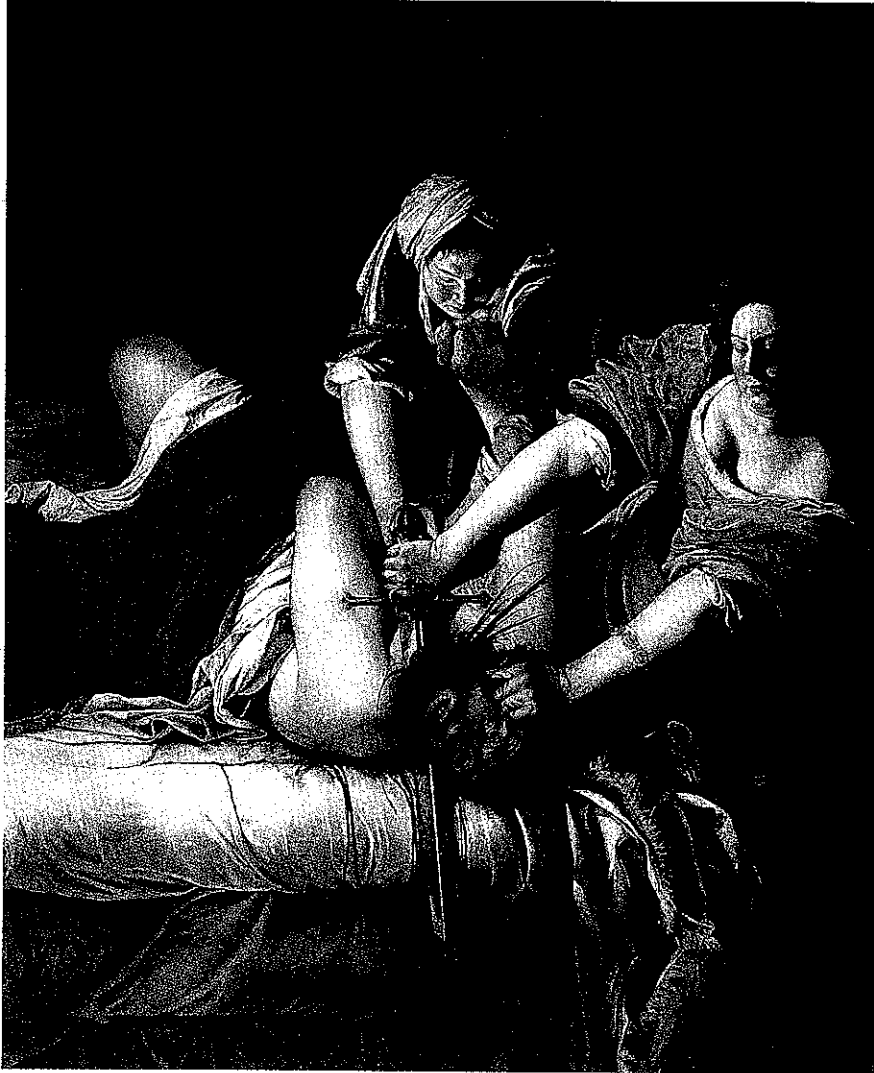
to nourish the familie and children, and not to meddle with affairs abroad."<sup>26</sup> Wealthy women might support charitable organizations, but men denied them any sort of political or legal activity.

Excluded from the public arena, the noblewoman or spouse of a rich merchant managed the household or court (see page 418), where the husband displayed his wealth and power (the larger the number of servants and retainers, the greater his prestige). Households depended on domestic servants, and the lady of the house had to have the shrewdness and managerial prudence to employ capable cooks, maids, tailors and seamstresses, laundresses, gardeners, coachmen, stable hands, nurses, and handymen. If a prosperous Florentine or Venetian merchant's household had fifteen to twenty servants, a great lord or a Medici banker could easily employ four times that number. The lady of the house had to make sure that all these people were adequately fed and clothed; to maintain harmony among them; to tend anyone who fell ill, meaning that she must have at least a rudimentary knowledge of medications; and to look after the girl who "accidentally" became pregnant and then her child. Custom also laid on the lady the respon-

sibility for providing the servants with religious instruction. Then there was the education of her own children and possibly the care of aged or infirm in-laws. Her husband expected her to entertain (which, depending on his position, could be an elaborate and complicated undertaking) and preside over each occasion with grace and, if possible, charm. All of these burdens, in addition to her own pregnancies, added up to an enormous responsibility.

### Culture and Sexuality

With respect to love and sex, the Renaissance witnessed a downward shift in women's status. In contrast to the medieval tradition of relative sexual equality, Renaissance humanists laid the foundations for the bourgeois double standard. Castiglione, the foremost spokesman of Renaissance love and manners, completely separated love from sexuality. For women, sex was restricted entirely to marriage. Women were bound to chastity and then to the roles of wife and mother in a politically arranged marriage. Men, however, could pursue sensual indulgence outside marriage.<sup>27</sup>



**Artemesia Gentileschi: Judith Slaying Holofernes** The Old Testament Book of Judith tells the tale of the beautiful widow Judith, who first charms and then decapitates the Assyrian general Holofernes, thus saving Israel. The message is that trust in God will bring deliverance. The talented Roman artist Artemesia Gentileschi (1593–1652/3), elected to the Florentine Academy of Design at age twenty-three, rendered the story in this dramatic and gruesome painting, whose light and gushing blood give it great power. Some scholars hold that the painting is Gentileschi's pictorial revenge for her alleged rape by the decorative artist Agostino Tassi. (*Uffizi, Florence/Alinari/Art Resource, NY*)

Official attitudes toward rape provide an index of the status of women in the Renaissance. According to a study of the legal evidence from Venice in the years 1338 to 1358, rape was not considered a particularly serious crime against either the victim or society. Noble youths committed a higher percentage of rapes than their small numbers in Venetian society would imply. The rape of a young girl of marriageable age or a child under twelve was considered a graver crime than the rape of a married woman. Nevertheless, the punishment for rape of a noble, marriageable girl was only a fine or about six months' imprisonment. In an age when theft and robbery were punished by mutilation, and forgery and sodomy by burning, this penalty was very mild indeed. When a youth of the

upper class was convicted of the rape of a non-noble girl, his punishment was even lighter. By contrast, the sexual assault of a noblewoman by a working-class man, which was extraordinarily rare, resulted in severe penalization because the crime had social and political overtones.

In the eleventh century, William the Conqueror had decreed that rapists be castrated, implicitly according women protection and a modicum of respect. But in the early Renaissance, Venetian laws and their enforcement show that the governing oligarchy believed that rape damaged, but only slightly, men's property—women.<sup>28</sup>

A new study of country women based on fifteenth-century Florentine court records raises interesting questions but provides inconclusive evidence about women's

identity or violated a gender ideal. Only if an adult male assumed the passive role was his masculinity jeopardized. Such cases were extremely rare.<sup>34</sup>

Why was this kind of sexual activity so common? The evidence offers a variety of explanations. First among these is the general seclusion of "respectable" women and the late marriages of men. Perhaps 30 percent of the adult male population never married, and three-fourths of those who did postponed it, largely for economic reasons, until about age thirty-two. An occasional sexual experience with a boy did not preclude sex with women. Other explanations include the construction of male identity and of forms of male sociability.

In 1476 an informer denounced the carpenter Piero di Bartolomeo for sexual relations with Bartolomeo di Jacopo, son of a grocer. When interrogated, fifteen-year-old Bartolomeo di Jacopo confessed that Piero "did [this] out of great love and good brotherhood, because they are in a confraternity together, and he did as good neighbors do." Bartolomeo di Jacopo understood their relationship as being based on the traditional emotional bonds between members of their confraternity and neighborhood associations. Their sexual relationship, though forbidden, was woven into the entire fabric of their community life.<sup>35</sup>

Other explanations for youthful homoerotic activity include the desire for gifts, money, or some material reward from the adult partner; parental complicity in urging attractive teenage sons to accept the attentions of wealthy suitors; the need for companionship and same-age cohorts—that is, peer pressure; gang rapes; and soldiers' demands that youthful servants satisfy their sexual needs. Sex among males—kinsmen, neighbors, coworkers, and groups of friends—fashioned the collective male experience. Homoerotic relationships played important roles in defining stages of life, expressing distinctions of status, and shaping masculine gender identity.<sup>36</sup>

### Slavery and Ethnicity

In a famous essay, the French historian Marc Bloch observed that "Western and Central Europe, taken as a whole, were never free of slaves during the High Middle Ages."<sup>37</sup> In central and eastern Europe, where political conditions were very unstable and permitted the enslavement of pagans, slavery allowed strong lords to satisfy cheaply the needs of their estates; slaves also offered merchants a commodity for profitable exchange with foreigners. Thus, in the period of eastward expansion (see Chapter 12), German lords seized Polish and Bohemian

peoples; used them as agricultural laborers, domestics, and concubines; and sold the rest. In the thirteenth century, Prague was a large slave market. The word *slave* always carried a definite ethnic connotation: it meant an unfree person of Slavic background.<sup>38</sup>

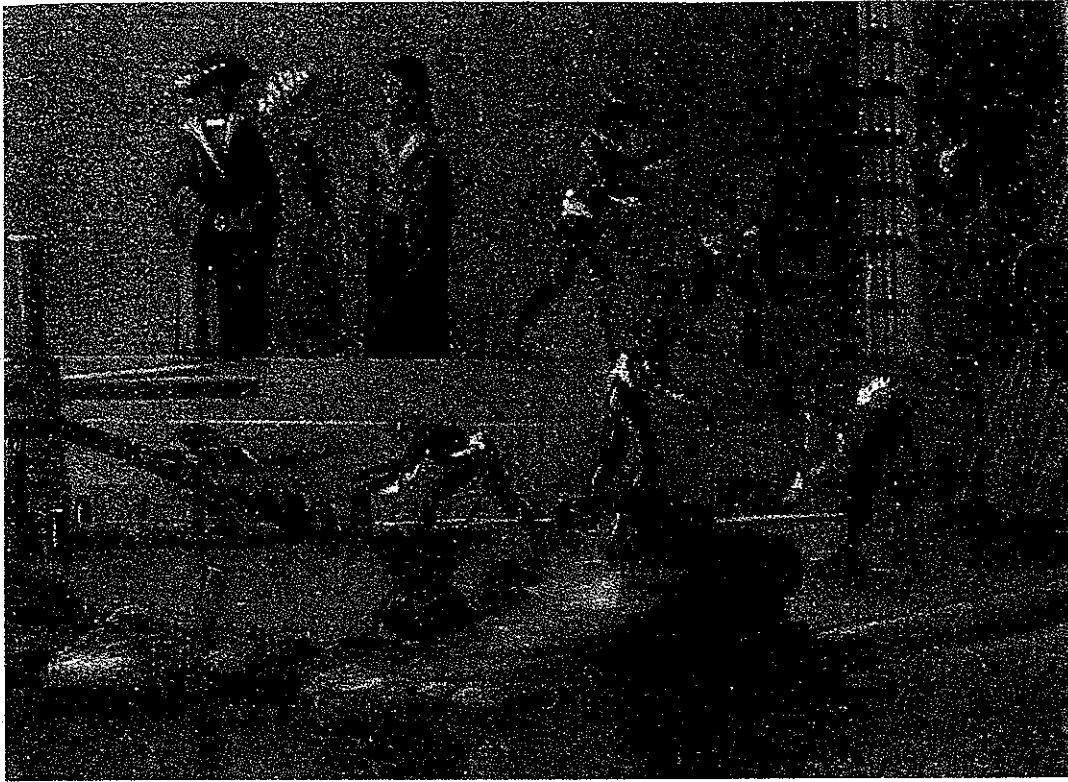
In the fourteenth century, Genoa and Venice dominated the Mediterranean slave trade. The labor shortage caused by the Black Death led to the flow of Russians, Tartars, and Circassian slaves from Azov in the Crimea and of Serbs, Albanians, Greeks, and Hungarians from the Balkans. Venetian control of the northern regions of the Dalmatian coast enabled Venetian slavers to import large numbers of female slaves from the port city of Dubrovnik.<sup>39</sup> All of these people, Slavic but of different ethnic backgrounds, gradually intermingled with the native Italian population.

Ever since the time of the Roman republic, a few black people had lived in western Europe. They had come, along with white slaves, as the spoils of war. Even after the collapse of the Roman Empire, Muslim and Christian merchants continued to import them. The evidence of medieval art attests to the presence of Africans in Europe and to Europeans' awareness of them.

As in Slavic regions, unstable political conditions in many parts of Africa enabled enterprising merchants to seize people and sell them into slavery. Local authorities afforded them no protection. Long tradition, moreover, sanctioned the practice of slavery. Beginning in the fifteenth century, sizable numbers of black slaves entered Europe. Portuguese explorers imported perhaps a thousand a year and sold them at the markets of Seville, Barcelona, Marseilles, and Genoa. By the mid-sixteenth century, blacks, slave and free, constituted about 10 percent of the populations of the Portuguese cities of Lisbon and Évora; other cities had smaller percentages. In all, blacks made up roughly 3 percent of the Portuguese population. The Venetians specialized in the importation of white slaves, but blacks were so greatly in demand at the Renaissance courts of northern Italy that the Venetians defied papal threats of excommunication to secure them. Although blacks were concentrated in the Iberian Peninsula, there must have been some Africans in northern Europe as well. In the 1580s, for example, Queen Elizabeth I of England complained that there were too many "blackamoors" competing with needy English people for places as domestic servants.<sup>40</sup>

What roles did blacks play in Renaissance society? Although few written records survive, obviously black slaves in Europe hated the loss of their freedom, separation from their societal roots, and forced labor without





**Carpaccio: Black Laborers on the Venetian Docks (detail)** Enslaved and free blacks, besides working as gondoliers on the Venetian canals, served on the docks: here seven black men careen—clean, caulk, and repair—a ship. Carpaccio's reputation as one of Venice's outstanding painters rests on his eye for details of everyday life. (*Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice/Scala/Art Resource, NY*)

compensation. No doubt, too, they disliked the alien culture, the cold climate, and the strange foods. But so far as we know, few who managed to secure their freedom through manumission or escape chose to return to Africa. The lack of black slave revolts in Europe, so common in South and North America and in Africa under colonial rule, attests to the small numbers and wide dispersion of blacks and to a relatively benign pattern of slavery. Moreover, the legal definition of *slave* never took on the rigid character in Europe that it did in the United States.

Within Africa, the economic goals of rulers and merchants took priority over any cultural, ethnic, or racial hostilities they may have felt toward Europeans. For example, in 1492 the king of the Congo learned of the arrival of Portuguese ships off the Congo estuary. He needed support in a local war and new resources; his biggest asset was a large concentration of slaves near his capital. So he accepted Christian baptism and began to

exchange slaves for weapons and other Portuguese goods. His son Alfonso Mbemba Nzinga adopted a European lifestyle: he renamed his capital São Salvador; took on Portuguese dress, etiquette, and literacy; and assigned Portuguese titles to his officials and courtiers. Meanwhile, the flow of slaves from the region accelerated. Between 1500 and 1525, about seventeen hundred slaves a year were traded to the Portuguese. By 1530 between four thousand and five thousand were being sold to the Portuguese each year.<sup>41</sup> What does this tell us about Africans' attitudes toward white Europeans? First, obviously, the interests of African rulers and those of their peoples diverged considerably. Second, African rulers' and merchants' desire for revenue and goods was the driving force in the sale of black people to white Europeans.

Westerners tend to lump all sub-Saharan Africans into one category: black. However, Africans, like Europeans and Asians, belonged to and identified themselves by

ethnic groups. In Africa, the world's second-largest continent, there were (and are) more than six hundred distinct ethnic groups. In addition, African slaves in the Iberian Peninsula (and elsewhere in Europe), like Slavic ones in Italy, intermingled with the people they lived among, and their offspring were, in fact, biracial.

However Africans may have been defined in Europe, black servants were much sought after, as the medieval interest in curiosities, the exotic, and the marvelous continued into the Renaissance. In the late fifteenth century, Isabella, the wife of Gian Galazzo Sforza, took pride in the fact that she owned ten blacks, seven of them females. A black lady's maid was both a curiosity and a symbol of wealth. In 1491 Isabella of Este, duchess of Mantua, instructed her agent to secure a black girl between four and eight years old, "shapely and as black as possible." The duchess saw the child as a source of entertainment: "We shall make her very happy and shall have great fun with her." She hoped the girl would become "the best buffoon in the world,"<sup>42</sup> as the cruel ancient practice of a noble household retaining a professional "fool" for the family's amusement persisted through the Renaissance—and even down to the twentieth century.

Adult black slaves served as maids, valets, and domestic servants. Italian aristocrats such as Marchesa Elena Grimaldi had their portraits painted with their black pageboys to indicate their wealth. The Venetians employed blacks—slave and free—as gondoliers and stevedores on the docks. In Portugal kings, nobles, laborers, monasteries and convents, and prostitutes owned slaves. They supplemented the labor force in virtually all occupations—as agricultural laborers, craftsmen, and seamen on ships going to Lisbon and Africa.<sup>43</sup> Tradition, stretching back at least as far as the thirteenth century, connected blacks with music and dance. In Renaissance Spain and Italy, blacks performed as dancers, as actors and actresses in courtly dramas, and as musicians, sometimes making up full orchestras.<sup>44</sup> Slavery during the Renaissance foreshadowed the American, especially the later Brazilian, pattern.

Before the sixteenth-century "discoveries" of the non-European world, Europeans had little concrete knowledge of Africans and their cultures. What Europeans did know was based on biblical accounts. The European attitude toward Africans was ambivalent. On the one hand, Europeans perceived Africa as a remote place, the home of strange people isolated by heresy and Islam from superior European civilization. Africans' contact, even as slaves, with Christian Europeans could only "improve" the blacks. Most Europeans' knowledge of the black as a racial type was based entirely on theological speculation.

Theologians taught that God was light. Blackness, the opposite of light, therefore represented the hostile forces of the underworld: evil, sin, and the Devil. Thus the Devil was commonly represented as a black man in medieval and early Renaissance art (see the illustration on page 437). On the other hand, blackness possessed certain positive qualities. It symbolized the emptiness of worldly goods, the humility of the monastic way of life. Black clothes permitted a conservative and discreet display of wealth. Black vestments and funeral trappings indicated grief, and Christ had said that those who mourn are blessed. Until the exploration and observation of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and nineteenth centuries allowed, ever so slowly, for the development of more scientific knowledge, the Western conception of black people remained bound up with religious notions.<sup>45</sup> As for the sterile and meaningless concept of race, recent scholarship stresses that it emerged only in the late seventeenth century.<sup>46</sup> In Renaissance society, blacks, like women, were signs of wealth; both were used for display.

## The Renaissance in the North

In the last quarter of the fifteenth century, students from the Low Countries, France, Germany, and England flocked to Italy, imbibed the "new learning," and carried it back to their countries. Northern humanists interpreted Italian ideas about and attitudes toward classical antiquity, individualism, and humanism in terms of their own traditions. The cultural traditions of northern Europe tended to remain more distinctly Christian, or at least pietistic, than those of Italy. But in Italy, secular and pagan themes and Greco-Roman motifs received more humanistic attention. North of the Alps, the Renaissance had a distinctly religious character, and humanists stressed biblical and early Christian themes. What fundamentally distinguished Italian humanists from northern ones is that the latter had a program for broad social reform based on Christian ideals.

Christian humanists were interested in the development of an ethical way of life. To achieve it, they believed that the best elements of classical and Christian cultures should be combined. For example, the classical ideals of calmness, stoical patience, and broad-mindedness should be joined in human conduct with the Christian virtues of love, faith, and hope. Northern humanists also stressed the use of reason, rather than acceptance of dogma, as the foundation for an ethical way of life. Like the Italians, they were impatient with Scholastic philosophy. Christian humanists had a profound faith in the power of human

intellect to bring about moral and institutional reform. They believed that, although human nature had been corrupted by sin, it was fundamentally good and capable of improvement through education.

The Englishman Thomas More (1478–1535) towered above other figures in sixteenth-century English social and intellectual history. Trained as a lawyer, More lived as a student in the London Charterhouse, a Carthusian monastery. He subsequently married and practiced law but became deeply interested in the classics; his household served as a model of warm Christian family life and as a mecca for foreign and English humanists. In the career pattern of such Italian humanists as Petrarch, More entered government service under Henry VIII and was sent as ambassador to Flanders. There More found the time to write *Utopia* (1516), which presents a revolutionary view of society.

*Utopia*, which means “nowhere,” describes an ideal socialistic community on an island somewhere off the mainland of the New World. All its children receive a good education, primarily in the Greco-Roman classics, and learning does not cease with maturity, for the goal of all education is to develop rational faculties. Adults divide their days between manual labor or business pursuits and various intellectual activities.

Because profits from business and property are held in common, there is absolute social equality. The Utopians use gold and silver to make chamber pots and to prevent wars by buying off their enemies. By this casual use of precious metals, More meant to suggest that the basic problems in society are caused by greed. Citizens of Utopia lead an ideal, nearly perfect existence because they live by reason; their institutions are perfect. More punned on the word *utopia*, which he termed “a good place. A good place which is no place.”

More’s ideas were profoundly original in the sixteenth century. Contrary to the long-prevailing view that vice and violence existed because women and men were basically corrupt, More maintained that acquisitiveness and private property promoted all sorts of vices and civil disorders. Since society protected private property, society’s flawed institutions were responsible for corruption and war. According to More, the key to improvement and reform of the individual was reform of the social institutions that molded the individual. Today this view is so much taken for granted that it is difficult to appreciate how radical More’s approach was in the sixteenth century.

Better known by contemporaries than Thomas More was the Dutch humanist Desiderius Erasmus (1466?–1536) of Rotterdam. Orphaned as a small boy, Erasmus was forced to enter a monastery. Although he intensely disliked the monastic life, he developed there an excellent

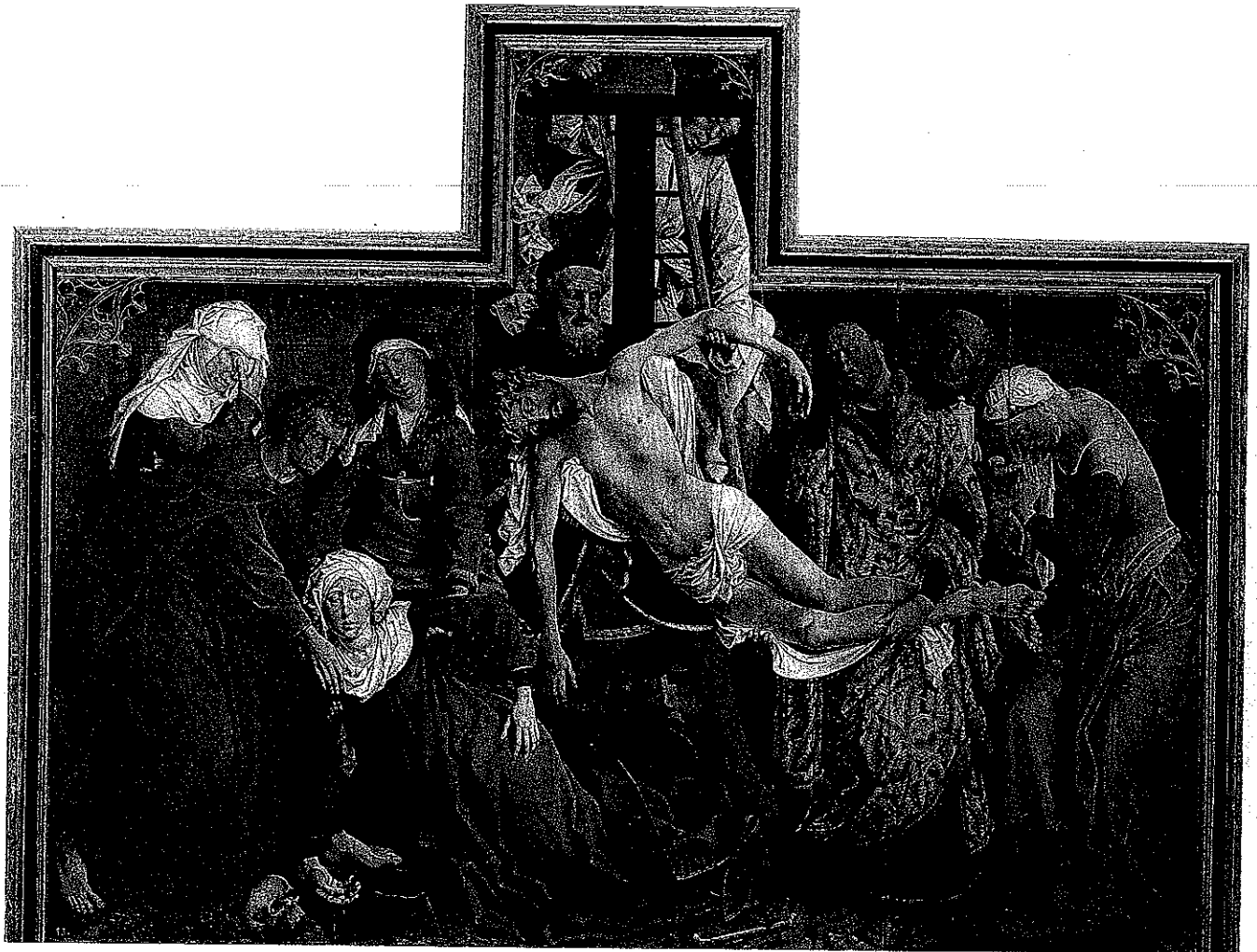
knowledge of the Latin language and a deep appreciation for the Latin classics. During a visit to England in 1499, Erasmus met the scholar John Colet, who decisively influenced his life’s work: the application of the best humanistic learning to the study and explanation of the Bible. As a mature scholar with an international reputation stretching from Cracow to London, a fame that rested largely on his exceptional knowledge of Greek, Erasmus could boast with truth, “I brought it about that humanism, which among the Italians . . . savored of nothing but pure paganism, began nobly to celebrate Christ.”<sup>47</sup>

Erasmus’s long list of publications includes *The Education of a Christian Prince* (1504), a book combining idealistic and practical suggestions for the formation of a ruler’s character through the careful study of Plutarch, Aristotle, Cicero, and Plato; *The Praise of Folly* (1509), a satire of worldly wisdom and a plea for the simple and spontaneous Christian faith of children; and, most important, a critical edition of the Greek New Testament (1516). In the preface to the New Testament, Erasmus explained the purpose of his great work:

*For I utterly dissent from those who are unwilling that the sacred Scriptures should be read by the unlearned translated into their vulgar tongue, as though Christ had taught such subtleties that they can scarcely be understood even by a few theologians. . . . Christ wished his mysteries to be published as openly as possible. I wish that even the weakest woman should read the Gospel—should read the epistles of Paul. And I wish these were translated into all languages, so that they might be read and understood, not only by Scots and Irishmen, but also by Turks and Saracens.*<sup>48</sup>

Two fundamental themes run through all of Erasmus’s work. First, education is the means to reform, the key to moral and intellectual improvement. The core of education ought to be study of the Bible and the classics. (See the feature “Listening to the Past: An Age of Gold” on pages 452–453.) Second, the essence of Erasmus’s thought is, in his own phrase, “the philosophy of Christ.” By this Erasmus meant that Christianity is an inner attitude of the heart or spirit. Christianity is not formalism, special ceremonies, or law; Christianity is Christ—his life and what he said and did, not what theologians have written. The Sermon on the Mount, for Erasmus, expresses the heart of the Christian message.

Whereas the writings of Erasmus and More have strong Christian themes and have drawn the attention primarily of scholars, the stories of French humanist François Rabelais (1490?–1553) possess a distinctly secular flavor and have attracted broad readership among the literate public. Rabelais’s *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel*



**Rogier van der Weyden: Deposition** Taking as his subject the suffering and death of Jesus, a popular theme of Netherlandish piety, van der Weyden describes (in an inverted T) Christ's descent from the cross, surrounded by nine sorrowing figures. An appreciation of the human anatomy, the rich fabrics of the clothes, and the pierced and bloody hands of Jesus were all intended to touch the viewers' emotions. (Museo del Prado/Scala/Art Resource, NY)

(serialized between 1532 and 1552) belong among the great comic masterpieces of world literature. These stories' gross and robust humor introduced the adjective *Rabelaisian* into the language.

*Gargantua* and *Pantagruel* can be read on several levels: as a comic romance about the adventures of the giant Gargantua and his son, Pantagruel; as a spoof on contemporary French society; as a program for educational reform; or as an illustration of Rabelais's prodigious learning. The reader enters a world of Renaissance vitality, ribald joviality, and intellectual curiosity. In his trav-

els, Gargantua meets various absurd characters, and within their hilarious exchanges occur serious discussions of religion, politics, philosophy, and education. Like More and Erasmus, Rabelais did not denounce institutions directly. Like Erasmus, Rabelais satirized hypocritical monks, pedantic academics, and pompous lawyers. But whereas Erasmus employed intellectual cleverness and sophisticated wit, Rabelais applied wild and gross humor. Like Thomas More, Rabelais believed that institutions molded individuals and that education was the key to a moral and healthy life. Whereas the middle-class in-

habitants of More's Utopia lived lives of restrained moderation, the aristocratic residents of Rabelais's *Thélème* lived for the gratification of their physical instincts and rational curiosity.

The distinctly religious orientation of the literary works of the Renaissance in the north also characterized northern art and architecture. Some Flemish painters, notably Rogier van der Weyden (1399/1400–1464) and Jan van Eyck (1366–1441), were considered the artistic equals of Italian painters, were much admired in Italy, and worked a generation before Leonardo and Michelangelo. Van Eyck, one of the earliest artists to use oil-based paints successfully, shows the Flemish love for detail in paintings such as *Ghent Altarpiece* and the portrait *Giovanni Arnolfini and His Bride*; the effect is great realism and remarkable attention to human personality.

Another Flemish painter, Jerome Bosch (1450?–1516), frequently used religious themes, but in combination with grotesque fantasies, colorful imagery, and peasant folk legends (see page 461). Many of Bosch's paintings reflect the confusion and anguish often associated with the end of the Middle Ages.

A quasi-spiritual aura infuses architectural monuments in the north. The city halls of wealthy Flemish towns such as Bruges, Brussels, Louvain, and Ghent strike the viewer more as shrines to house the bones of saints than as settings for the mundane decisions of politicians and business people. Northern architecture was little influenced by the classical revival so obvious in Renaissance Rome and Florence.

## Politics and the State in the Renaissance (ca 1450–1521)

The High Middle Ages had witnessed the origins of many of the basic institutions of the modern state. Sheriffs, inquests, juries, circuit judges, professional bureaucracies, and representative assemblies all trace their origins to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (see pages 340–344). The linchpin for the development of states, however, was strong monarchy, and during the period of the Hundred Years' War, no ruler in western Europe was able to provide effective leadership. The resurgent power of feudal nobilities weakened the centralizing work begun earlier.

Beginning in the fifteenth century, rulers utilized the aggressive methods implied by Renaissance political ideas to rebuild their governments. First in Italy, then in France, England, and Spain, rulers began the work of reducing violence, curbing unruly nobles, and establishing

domestic order. Divided into scores of independent principalities, Germany could not deal with the Roman church as an equal.

The dictators and oligarchs of the Italian city-states, together with Louis XI of France, Henry VII of England, and Ferdinand of Aragon, were tough, cynical, calculating rulers. In their ruthless push for power and strong governments, they subordinated morality to hard results. They preferred to be secure, if feared, rather than loved. They could not have read Machiavelli's *The Prince*, but they acted as though they understood its ideas.

Some historians have called Louis XI, Henry VII, and Ferdinand and Isabella in Spain "new monarchs." The term is only partly appropriate. These monarchs were new in that they invested kingship with a strong sense of royal authority and national purpose. They stressed that monarchy was the one institution that linked all classes and peoples within definite territorial boundaries. These rulers emphasized royal majesty and royal sovereignty and insisted on the respect and loyalty of all subjects. These monarchs ruthlessly suppressed opposition and rebellion, especially from the nobility. They loved the business of kingship and worked hard at it.

In other respects, however, the methods of these rulers, which varied from country to country, were not so new. They reasserted long-standing ideas and practices of strong monarchs in the Middle Ages. They seized on the maxim of the Justinian *Code*, "What pleases the prince has the force of law," to advance their authority. Some medieval rulers, such as Henry I of England, had depended heavily on middle-class officials. Renaissance rulers, too, tended to rely on middle-class civil servants. With tax revenues, medieval rulers had built armies to crush feudal anarchy. Renaissance townspeople with commercial and business interests naturally wanted a reduction of violence, and usually they were willing to pay taxes in order to achieve it.

### France

The Hundred Years' War left France drastically depopulated, commercially ruined, and agriculturally weak. Nonetheless, the ruler whom Joan of Arc had seen crowned at Reims, Charles VII (r. 1422–1461), revived the monarchy and France. He seemed an unlikely person to do so. Frail, indecisive, and burdened with questions about his paternity (his father had been deranged; his mother, notoriously promiscuous), Charles VII nevertheless began France's long recovery.

Charles reconciled the Burgundians and Armagnacs, who had been waging civil war for thirty years. By 1453 French armies had expelled the English from French soil

except in Calais. Charles reorganized the royal council, giving increased influence to middle-class men, and strengthened royal finances through such taxes as the *gabelle* (on salt) and the *taille* (land tax). These taxes remained the Crown's chief sources of income until the Revolution of 1789.

By establishing regular companies of cavalry and archers—recruited, paid, and inspected by the state—Charles created the first permanent royal army. In 1438 Charles published the **Pragmatic Sanction of Bourges**, asserting the superiority of a general council over the papacy, giving the French crown major control over the appointment of bishops, and depriving the pope of French ecclesiastical revenues. The Pragmatic Sanction established Gallican (or French) liberties because it affirmed the special rights of the French crown over the French church. Greater control over the church and the army helped to consolidate the authority of the French crown.

Charles's son Louis XI (r. 1461–1483), called the “Spider King” because of his treacherous character, was very much a Renaissance prince. Facing the perpetual French problem of reduction of feudal disorder, he saw money as the answer. Louis promoted new industries, such as silk weaving at Lyons and Tours. He welcomed foreign craftsmen and entered into commercial treaties with England, Portugal, and the towns of the Hanseatic League (see page 354). He used the revenues raised through these economic activities and severe taxation to improve the army. With the army, Louis stopped aristocratic brigandage and slowly cut into urban independence.

Luck favored his goal of expanding royal authority and unifying the kingdom. On the timely death of Charles the Bold, duke of Burgundy, in 1477, Louis invaded Burgundy and gained some territories. Three years later, the extinction of the house of Anjou brought Louis the counties of Anjou, Bar, Maine, and Provence.

Two further developments strengthened the French monarchy. The marriage of Louis XII (r. 1498–1515) and Anne of Brittany added the large western duchy of Brittany to the state. Then the French king Francis I and Pope Leo X reached a mutually satisfactory agreement in 1516. The new treaty, the Concordat of Bologna, rescinded the Pragmatic Sanction's assertion of the superiority of a general council over the papacy and approved the pope's right to receive the first year's income of new bishops and abbots. In return, Leo X recognized the French ruler's right to select French bishops and abbots. French kings thereafter effectively controlled the appointment and thus the policies of church officials within the kingdom.

## England

English society suffered severely from the disorders of the fifteenth century. The aristocracy dominated the government of Henry IV (r. 1399–1413) and indulged in mischievous violence at the local level. Population, decimated by the Black Death, continued to decline. Between 1455 and 1471, adherents of the ducal houses of York and Lancaster waged civil war, commonly called the Wars of the Roses because the symbol of the Yorkists was a white rose and that of the Lancastrians a red one. The chronic disorder hurt trade, agriculture, and domestic industry. Under the pious but mentally disturbed Henry VI, the authority of the monarchy sank lower than it had been in centuries.

The Yorkist Edward IV (r. 1461–1483) began establishing domestic tranquillity. He succeeded in defeating the Lancastrian forces and after 1471 began to reconstruct the monarchy. Edward, his brother Richard III (r. 1483–1485), and Henry VII (r. 1485–1509) of the Welsh house of Tudor worked to restore royal prestige, to crush the power of the nobility, and to establish order and law at the local level. All three rulers used methods that Machiavelli himself would have praised—ruthlessness, efficiency, and secrecy.

The Hundred Years' War had been financed by Parliament. Dominated by baronial factions, Parliament had been the arena where the nobility exerted its power. As long as the monarchy was dependent on the Lords and the Commons for revenue, the king had to call Parliament. Edward IV and subsequently the Tudors, excepting Henry VIII, conducted foreign policy on the basis of diplomacy, avoiding expensive wars. Thus the English monarchy did not depend on Parliament for money, and the Crown undercut that source of aristocratic influence.

Henry VII did summon several meetings of Parliament in the early years of his reign primarily to confirm laws, but the center of royal authority was the **royal council**, which governed at the national level. There Henry VII revealed his distrust of the nobility: though not completely excluded, very few great lords were among the king's closest advisers. Regular representatives on the council numbered between twelve and fifteen men, and while many gained high ecclesiastical rank (the means, as it happened, by which the Crown paid them), their origins were in the lesser landowning class, and their education was in law. They were, in a sense, middle-class.

The royal council handled any business the king put before it—executive, legislative, and judicial. For example, the council conducted negotiations with foreign

governments and secured international recognition of the Tudor dynasty through the marriage in 1501 of Henry VII's eldest son, Arthur, to Catherine of Aragon, the daughter of Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain. The council dealt with real or potential aristocratic threats through a judicial offshoot, the **court of Star Chamber**, so called because of the stars painted on the ceiling of the room. The court applied principles of Roman law, and its methods were sometimes terrifying: accused persons were not entitled to see evidence against them, sessions were secret, torture could be applied to extract confessions, and juries were not called. These procedures ran directly counter to English common-law precedents, but they effectively reduced aristocratic troublemaking.

Unlike the continental countries of Spain and France, England had no standing army or professional civil service bureaucracy. The Tudors relied on the support of unpaid local officials, the **justices of the peace**. These influential landowners in the shires handled all the work of local government. They apprehended and punished criminals, enforced parliamentary statutes, fixed wages and prices, maintained proper standards of weights and measures, and even checked up on moral behavior.

The Tudors won the support of the influential upper middle class because the Crown linked government policy with the interests of that class. A commercial or agricultural upper class fears and dislikes few things more than disorder and violence. The Tudors promoted peace and social order, and the gentry did not object to arbitrary methods, like those of the court of Star Chamber, because the government had halted the long period of anarchy.

Secretive, cautious, and thrifty, Henry VII rebuilt the monarchy. He encouraged the cloth industry and built up the English merchant marine. English exports of wool and the royal export tax on that wool steadily increased. Henry crushed an invasion from Ireland and secured peace with Scotland through the marriage of his daughter Margaret to the Scottish king. When Henry VII died in 1509, he left a country at peace both domestically and internationally, a substantially augmented treasury, and the dignity and role of the royal majesty much enhanced.

## Spain

While England and France laid the foundations of unified nation-states during the Renaissance, Spain remained a conglomerate of independent kingdoms. Castile and León formed a single political organization, but Aragon consisted of the principalities of Aragon, Valencia, Majorca, Sicily, Cardena, and Naples, each tied to the crown

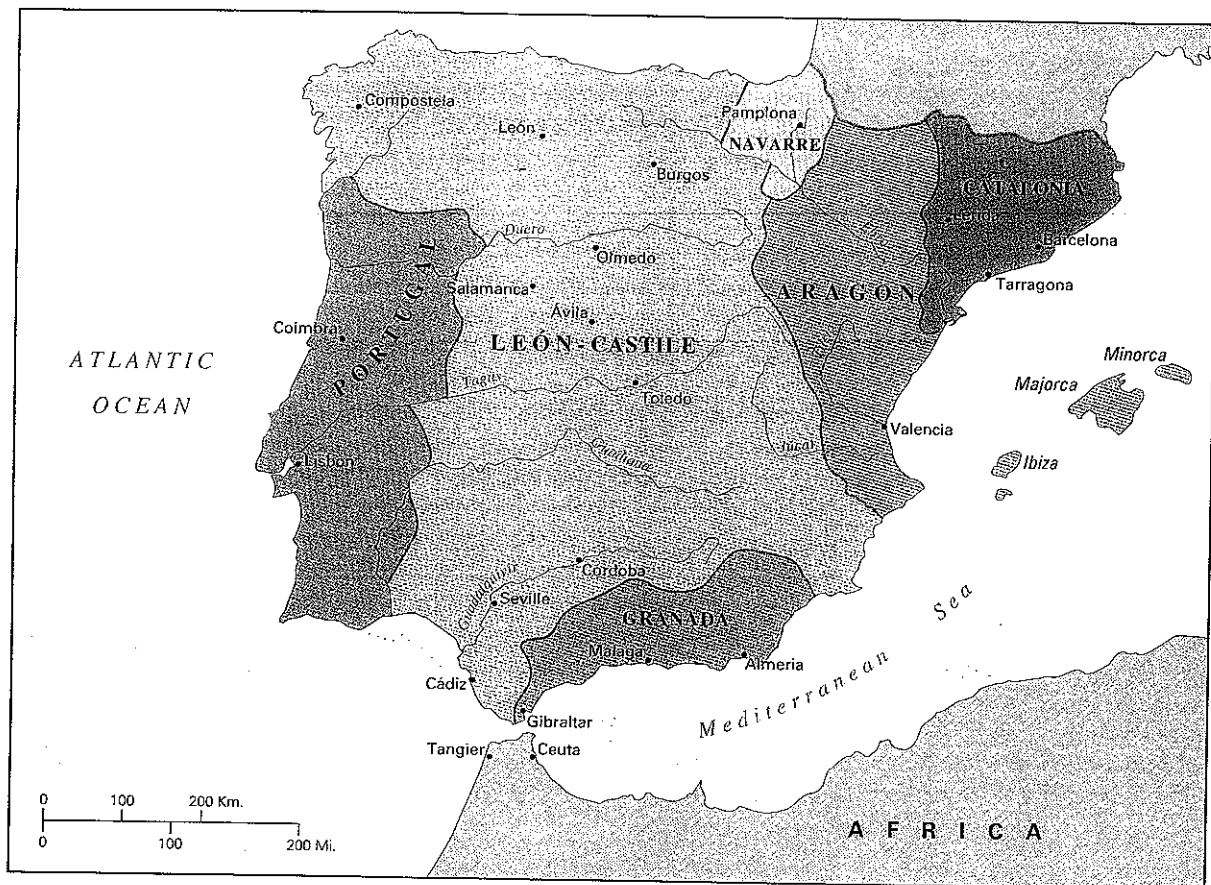
of Aragon in a different way. On the one hand, the legacy of Hispanic, Roman, Visigothic, Jewish, and Muslim peoples made for rich cultural diversity; on the other hand, the Iberian Peninsula lacked a common cultural tradition.

The centuries-long reconquista—the wars of the northern Christian kingdoms to control the entire peninsula (see pages 285–286)—had military and religious objectives: conversion or expulsion of the Muslims and Jews and political control of the south. By the middle of the fifteenth century, the kingdoms of Castile and Aragon dominated the weaker Navarre, Portugal, and Granada, and the Iberian Peninsula, with the exception of Granada, had been won for Christianity. But even the wedding in 1469 of the dynamic and aggressive Isabella of Castile and the crafty and persistent Ferdinand of Aragon did not bring about administrative unity. Rather, their marriage constituted a dynastic union of two royal houses, not the political union of two peoples. Although Ferdinand and Isabella (r. 1474–1516) pursued a common foreign policy, Spain existed until about 1700 as a loose confederation of separate kingdoms (see Map 13.3), each maintaining its own *cortes* (parliament), laws, courts, and systems of coinage and taxation.

To curb the rebellious and warring aristocracy, Ferdinand and Isabella revived an old medieval institution: the **hermandades**, or “brotherhoods,” which were popular groups in the towns given authority to act as local police forces and as judicial tribunals. The hermandades repressed violence with such savage punishments that by 1498 they could be disbanded.

The decisive step Ferdinand and Isabella took to curb aristocratic power was the restructuring of the royal council. Aristocrats and great territorial magnates were rigorously excluded; thus the influence of the nobility on state policy was greatly reduced. Ferdinand and Isabella intended the council to be the cornerstone of their government system, with full executive, judicial, and legislative powers under the monarchy. The council was also to be responsible for the supervision of local authorities. The king and queen therefore appointed to the council only people of middle-class background. The council and various government boards recruited men trained in Roman law, which exalted the power of the Crown as the embodiment of the state.

In the extension of royal authority and the consolidation of the territories of Spain, the church was the linchpin. If the Spanish crown could select the higher clergy, then the monarchy could influence ecclesiastical policy, wealth, and military resources. Through a diplomatic alliance with the Spanish pope Alexander VI, the Spanish



**MAP 13.3 Spain in 1492** The marriage of Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile in 1469 represented a dynastic union of two houses, not a political union of two peoples. Some principalities, such as León (part of Castile) and Catalonia (part of Aragon), had their own cultures, languages, and legal systems. Barcelona, the port city of Catalonia, controlled a commercial empire throughout the Mediterranean. The culture of Granada was heavily Muslim.

monarchs secured the right to appoint bishops in Spain and in the Hispanic territories in America. This power enabled the “Catholic Kings of Spain,” a title granted Ferdinand and Isabella by the papacy, to establish, in effect, a national church.<sup>49</sup>

Revenues from ecclesiastical estates provided the means to raise an army to continue the reconquista. The victorious entry of Ferdinand and Isabella into Granada on January 6, 1492, signaled the culmination of eight centuries of Spanish struggle against the Arabs in southern Spain and the conclusion of the reconquista (see Map 9.3 on page 286). Granada in the south was incorporated into the Spanish kingdom, and in 1512 Ferdinand conquered Navarre in the north.

There still remained a sizable and, in the view of the majority of the Spanish people, potentially dangerous minority, the Jews. During the long centuries of the reconquista, Christian kings had renewed Jewish rights and privileges; in fact, Jewish industry, intelligence, and money had supported royal power. While Christians of all classes borrowed from Jewish moneylenders, and while all who could afford them sought Jewish physicians, a strong undercurrent of resentment of Jewish influence and wealth festered. When the kings of France and England had expelled the Jews from their kingdoms (see pages 344–345), many had sought refuge in Spain. In the fourteenth century, Jews formed an integral and indispensable part of Spanish life. With vast numbers of



Muslims, Jews, and Moorish Christians, medieval Spain represented the most diverse and cosmopolitan country in Europe. Diversity and cosmopolitanism, however, were not medieval social ideals.

Since ancient times, governments had seldom tolerated religious pluralism; religious faiths that differed from the official state religion were considered politically dangerous. But in the fourteenth century, anti-Semitism in Spain rose more from popular sentiment than from royal policies. Aggravated by fiery anti-Jewish preaching, by economic dislocation, and by the search for a scapegoat during the Black Death, the fourteenth century witnessed rising anti-Semitic feeling. In 1331 a mob attacked the Jewish community of Gerona in Catalonia. In 1355 royal troops massacred Jews in Toledo. On June 4, 1391, inflamed by "religious" preaching, mobs sacked and burned the Jewish community in Seville and compelled such Jews as survived to accept baptism. From Seville anti-Semitic pogroms swept the towns of Valencia, Barcelona, Burgos, Madrid, and Segovia. One scholar estimates that 40 percent of the Jewish population of Spain was killed or forced to convert.<sup>50</sup> Those converted were called *conversos*, *Marranos*, or **New Christians**, the three terms here used interchangeably.

King Ferdinand was not a religious fanatic. He was a Renaissance prince who wanted to *appear* as a moral and devout Christian, respectful of public opinion. He feared urban rioting and disorder, but he knew that the vast majority of the Spanish people hated the conversos. If the Crown protected them, it would lose popular support. Ferdinand resolved the dilemma by seeking papal permission to set up the Inquisition in Spain; if the actions of the Inquisition provoked public criticism, the papacy could be blamed. Pope Sixtus IV's bull authorizing the Inquisition reached Spain in November 1478, and on September 28, 1480, Ferdinand and Isabella ordered the establishment of tribunals to "search out and punish converts from Judaism who had transgressed against Christianity by secretly adhering to Jewish beliefs and performing rites of the Jews."<sup>51</sup>

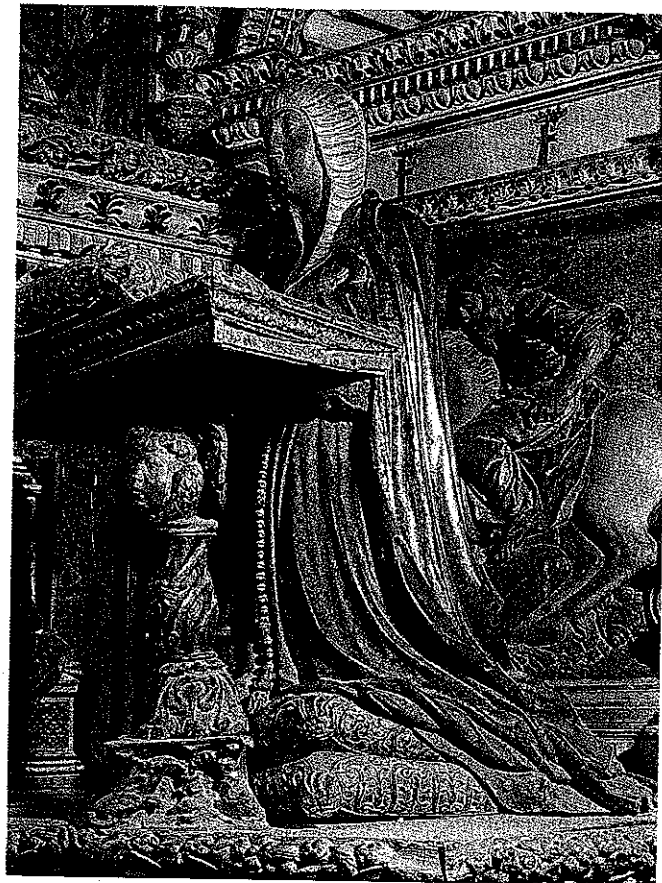
What do we know of these New Christians? Why did they inspire such hostility? How did they view their religious position? In the administration of Castile, New Christians held the royal secretaryship, controlled the royal treasury, and composed a third of the royal council. In the church, they held high positions as archbishops, bishops, and abbots. In the administration of the towns, conversos often held the highest public offices; in Toledo they controlled the collection of royal revenues. They included some of the leading merchants and business

people. They also served great magnates, and by intermarrying with the nobility, they gained political leverage. In the professions of medicine and law, New Christians held the most prominent positions. Numbering perhaps 200,000 in a total Spanish population of about 7.5 million, New Christians and Jews exercised influence disproportionate to their numbers. Aristocratic grandees resented their financial dependence, the poor hated the converso tax collectors, and churchmen doubted the sincerity of their conversions.

Recent scholarship has carefully analyzed documents written by New Christians for their reactions to the rising anti-Semitism. They identified themselves as Christians. In the 1480s, they unanimously insisted that they were happy to be Christians and failed to see why they should be labeled New Christians: many came from families that had received baptism generations before. They argued that just as Christ had never abandoned the ancient (Hebrew) Law, so they had not abandoned it; in fact, they had a better and clearer understanding of the Christian faith. For the New Christians, the issue was not that they had relinquished the faith of the Jews (and secretly reconverted); rather, in accepting Christianity, they had become real Jews and, in following Jesus, real Christians.<sup>52</sup>

This argument satisfied neither the Jews nor the conversos' enemies. The Jewish reaction to persecution of the conversos was, bluntly put, "Well, we told you so; it's just what you get."<sup>53</sup> Searching for a viable principle to use against both New Christians and Jews, their detractors hit not on what conversos believed, not on what they did, but on what they *were* as human beings. Hence arose the following racial theory: "Since race, they maintained, formed man's qualities and indeed his entire mental constitution, the Marranos, who were all offspring of Jews, retained the racial makeup of their forebears. . . . [E]thnically they were what they (or their ancestors) had been before their conversion to Christianity; in other words, they were Jews."<sup>54</sup> This absurd racist theory, which violated scriptural teaching, maintained that all conversos were malicious, immoral, and criminally inclined by their nature, and thus they could not be truly converted to Christianity.

Fifteenth-century Spanish anti-Semitism emerged at the very time a Spanish national feeling was emerging, a national sentiment that looked to the building of a single nation. Whereas earlier anti-Semitism, such as that during the time of the Black Death, alleged Jewish schemes to kill off entire Christian populations—by poisoning the wells, for example, from which Jews derived no profit—fifteenth-century theories held that Jews or



**Felipe Bigarny: Ferdinand the Catholic and Isabella the Catholic** All governments try to cultivate a popular image. For Ferdinand and Isabella, it was the appearance of piety. Contemporaries, such as the Burgundian sculptor Bigarny, portrayed them as paragons of Christian piety, as shown in these polychrome wooden statues. If Isabella's piety was perhaps more genuine, she used it—together with rich ceremony, elaborate dress, and a fierce determination—to assert royal authority. (*Capilla Real, Granada/Laurie Platt Winfrey, Inc.*)

New Christians planned to take over all public offices in Spain. Jews, therefore, represented a grave threat to national unity.<sup>55</sup>

Although the Inquisition was a religious institution established to ensure the Catholic faith, it was controlled by the Crown and served primarily as a politically unifying tool. Because the Spanish Inquisition commonly applied torture to extract confessions, first from lapsed conversos, then from Muslims, and later from Protestants, it gained a notorious reputation. Thus the word *inquisition*, meaning “any judicial inquiry conducted with ruthless severity,” came into the English language. The methods of the Spanish Inquisition were cruel, though not as cruel as the investigative methods of some twentieth-

century governments. Shortly after the reduction of the Moorish stronghold at Granada in 1492, Isabella and Ferdinand issued an edict expelling all practicing Jews from Spain. Of the community of perhaps 200,000 Jews, 150,000 fled. (Efforts were made, through last-minute conversions, to retain good Jewish physicians.) Absolute religious orthodoxy and purity of blood (untainted by Jews or Muslims) served as the theoretical foundation of the Spanish national state.

The diplomacy of the Catholic rulers of Spain achieved a success they never anticipated. Partly out of hatred for the French and partly out of a desire to gain international recognition for their new dynasty, Ferdinand and Isabella in 1496 married their second daughter, Joanna, heiress

to Castile, to the archduke Philip, heir through his mother to the Burgundian Netherlands and through his father to the Holy Roman Empire. Philip and Joanna's son, Charles V (r. 1519–1556), thus succeeded to a vast patrimony. When Charles's son Philip II joined Portugal to the Spanish crown in 1580, the Iberian Peninsula was at last politically united. The various kingdoms, however, were administered separately.

## Summary

The Italian Renaissance rested on the phenomenal economic growth of the High Middle Ages. In the period from about 1050 to 1300, a new economy emerged based on Venetian and Genoese shipping and long-distance trade and on Florentine banking and cloth manufacture. These commercial activities, combined with the struggle of urban communes for political independence from surrounding feudal lords, led to the appearance of a new aristocratic class. The centuries extending roughly from 1300 to 1600 witnessed a remarkable intellectual flowering. Based on a strong interest in the ancient world, the Renaissance had a classicizing influence on many facets of culture: law, literature, government, education, religion, and art. In the city-states of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italy, oligarchic or despotic powers governed; Renaissance culture was manipulated to enhance the power of those rulers.

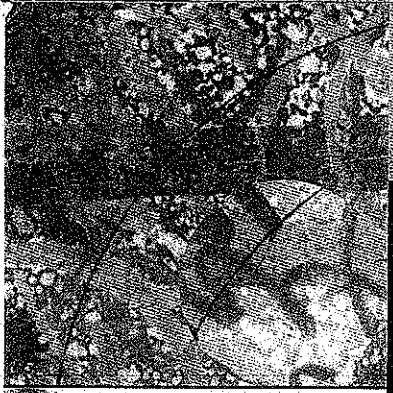
Expanding outside Italy, the intellectual features of this movement affected the culture of all Europe. The intellectual characteristics of the Renaissance were a secular attitude toward life, a belief in individual potential, and a serious interest in the Latin classics. The printing press revolutionized communication. Meanwhile, the status of women in society declined, and black people entered Europe in sizable numbers for the first time since the collapse of the Roman Empire. Male culture in Italian cities had a strongly homoerotic character, reflecting a significant contrast between Renaissance attitudes toward male sexuality and attitudes today. In northern Europe, city merchants and rural gentry allied with rising monarchies. With taxes provided by business people, kings established greater peace and order, both essential for trade. Northern humanism had a more pietistic strain than did the Italian. In Spain, France, and England, rulers also emphasized royal dignity and authority, and they utilized Machiavellian ideas to ensure the preservation and continuation of their governments. Feudal monarchies gradually evolved in the direction of nation-states.

## Key Terms

Renaissance	<i>The Prince</i>
communes	gabelle
popolo	Pragmatic Sanction of Bourges
signori	royal council
oligarchies	court of Star Chamber
republic	justices of the peace
princely courts	hermandades
individualism	New Christians
humanism	
secularism	

## Notes

1. See L. Martines, *Power and Imagination: City-States in Renaissance Italy* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), esp. pp. 332–333.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 22–61.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 221.
4. Quoted in J. Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (London: Phaidon Books, 1951), p. 89.
5. *Memoirs of Benvenuto Cellini: A Florentine Artist; Written by Himself* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1927), p. 2.
6. See C. Trinkaus, *In Our Image and Likeness: Humanity and Divinity in Italian Humanist Thought*, vol. 2 (London: Constable, 1970), pp. 505–529.
7. B. Burroughs, ed., *Vasari's Lives of the Artists* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1946), pp. 164–165.
8. See Martines, *Power and Imagination*, chap. 13, esp. pp. 241, 243.
9. R. A. Goldthwaite, *Wealth and the Demand for Art in Italy, 1300–1600* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), p. 5.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 213.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 224–229.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 121–129.
13. See A. Hauser, *The Social History of Art*, vol. 2 (New York: Vintage Books, 1959), chap. 3, esp. pp. 60, 68.
14. G. Bull, trans., *Aretino: Selected Letters* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1976), p. 109.
15. Quoted in P. and L. Murray, *A Dictionary of Art and Artists* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1963), p. 125.
16. Quoted in W. H. Woodward, *Vittorino da Feltre and Other Humanist Educators* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1897), pp. 96–97.
17. M. L. King, "Book-Lined Cells: Women and Humanism in the Early Italian Renaissance," in *Beyond Their Sex: Learned Women of the European Past*, ed. P. H. Labalme (New York: New York University Press, 1980), pp. 66–81, esp. p. 73.
18. C. E. Detmold, trans., *The Historical, Political and Diplomatic Writings of Niccolò Machiavelli* (Boston: J. R. Osgood, 1882), pp. 51–52.
19. *Ibid.*, pp. 54–55.
20. See F. Gilbert, *Machiavelli and Guicciardini: Politics and History in Sixteenth Century Florence* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1984), pp. 197–200.
21. E. L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early Modern Europe*, vol. 1 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 135. For an overall discussion, see pp. 126–159.



## Listening to the Past



### An Age of Gold

**A**s the foremost scholar of the early sixteenth century and a writer with international contacts, Desiderius Erasmus (1466?–1536) maintained a vast correspondence. In the letters here, he explains his belief that Europe was entering a golden age. The letters also reflect the spiritual ideals of northern European humanists. Wolfgang Capito (1478?–1541), a German scholar, was professor of theology at the University of Basel. Pope Leo X (1513–1521), second son of Lorenzo de' Medici, extended the hospitality of the papal court to men of letters, sought to rebuild Rome as a Renaissance capital, and pushed the building of the new Saint Peter's Basilica by licensing the sale of indulgences (see pages 459–460).

#### To Capito

It is no part of my nature, most learned Wolfgang, to be excessively fond of life; whether it is that I have, to my own mind, lived nearly long enough, having entered my fifty-first year, or that I see nothing in this life so splendid or delightful that it should be desired by one who is convinced by the Christian faith that a happier life awaits those who in this world earnestly attach themselves to piety. But at the present moment I could almost wish to be young again, for no other reason but this, that I anticipate the near approach of a golden age, so clearly do we see the minds of princes, as if changed by inspiration, devoting all their energies to the pursuit of peace. The chief movers in this matter are Pope Leo and Francis, King of France.

There is nothing this king does not do or does not suffer in his desire to avert war and consolidate peace . . . and exhibiting in this, as in everything else, a magnanimous and truly royal character. Therefore, when I see that the highest sovereigns of Europe—Francis of France, Charles the King Catholic, Henry of England, and the Emperor Maximilian—have set all their warlike preparations

aside and established peace upon solid and, as I trust, adamantine foundations, I am led to a confident hope that not only morality and Christian piety, but also a genuine and purer literature, may come to renewed life or greater splendour; especially as this object is pursued with equal zeal in various regions of the world—at Rome by Pope Leo, in Spain by the Cardinal of Toledo,\* in England by Henry, eighth of the name, himself not unskilled in letters, and among ourselves by our young King Charles.† In France, King Francis, who seems as it were born for this object, invites and entices from all countries men that excel in merit or in learning. Among the Germans the same object is pursued by many of their excellent princes and bishops, and especially by Maximilian Caesar,‡ whose old age, weary of so many wars, has determined to seek rest in the employments of peace, a resolution more becoming to his own years, while it is fortunate for the Christian world. To the piety of these princes it is due, that we see everywhere, as if upon a given signal, men of genius are arising and conspiring together to restore the best literature.

Polite letters, which were almost extinct, are now cultivated and embraced by Scots, by Danes, and by Irishmen. Medicine has a host of champions. . . . The Imperial Law is restored at Paris by William Budé, in Germany by Udalric Zasy; and mathematics at Basel by Henry of Glaris. In the theological sphere there was no little to be done, because this science has been hitherto mainly professed by those who are most

\*Francisco Jiménez de Cisneros (1436–1517), Spanish statesman and adviser to Queen Isabella who gained renown for his reform of the monasteries and the Spanish church.

†After 1516 king of Spain and much of the Netherlands; after 1519 Holy Roman emperor.

‡Holy Roman emperor (1493–1519), he was succeeded by his grandson Charles (above).

pertinacious in their abhorrence of the better literature,<sup>§</sup> and are the more successful in defending their own ignorance as they do it under pretext of piety, the unlearned vulgar being induced to believe that violence is offered to religion if anyone begins an assault upon their barbarism. . . . But even here I am confident of success if the knowledge of the three languages continues to be received in schools, as it has now begun. . . .

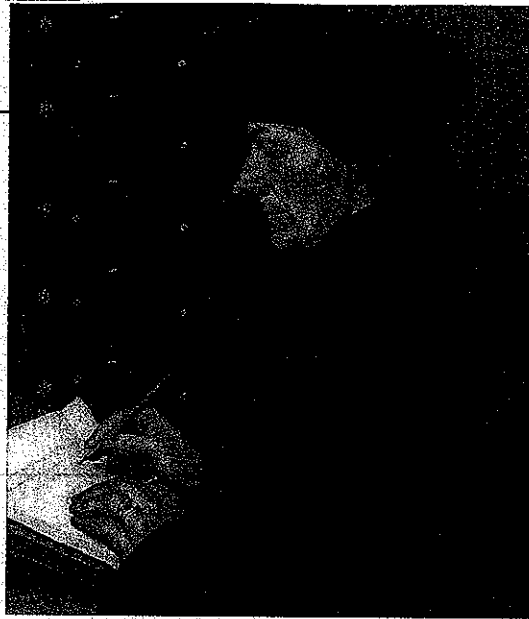
The humblest part of the work has naturally fallen to my lot. Whether my contribution has been worth anything I cannot say; . . . although the work was not undertaken by me with any confidence that I could myself teach anything magnificent, but I wanted to construct a road for other persons of higher aims, so that they might be less impeded by pools and stumbling blocks in carrying home those fair and glorious treasures.

Why should I say more? Everything promises me the happiest success. But one doubt still possesses my mind. I am afraid that, under cover of a revival of ancient literature, paganism may attempt to rear its head—as there are some among Christians that acknowledge Christ in name but breathe inwardly a heathen spirit—or, on the other hand, that the restoration of Hebrew learning may give occasion to a revival of Judaism. This would be a plague as much opposed to the doctrine of Christ as anything that could happen. . . . Some books have lately come out with a strong flavour of Judaism. I see how Paul exerted himself to defend Christ against Judaism, and I am aware that some persons are secretly sliding in that direction. . . . So much the more do I wish you to undertake this province; I know that your sincere piety will have regard to nothing but Christ, to whom all your studies are devoted. . . .

#### To Pope Leo X

While on the one hand, as a private matter, I acknowledge my own felicity in obtaining the approbation not only of the Supreme Pontiff but of Leo, by his own endowments supreme among the supreme, so on the other hand, as a matter of public concern, I congratulate this our age—which bids fair to be an age of gold, if ever such there was—wherein I see, under your happy auspices and by your holy counsels, three of the chief blessings of humanity are about to be restored to her. I mean, first, that truly Christian piety, which has in many ways fallen into

<sup>§</sup>Latin, Greek, and Hebrew.



Hans Holbein the Younger, *Erasmus* (ca 1521). Holbein persuaded his close friend Erasmus to sit for this portrait and portrayed him at his characteristic work, writing. (*Louvre/Scala/Art Resource, NY*)

decay; secondly, learning of the best sort, hitherto partly neglected and partly corrupted; and thirdly, the public and lasting concord of Christendom, the source and parent of piety and erudition. These will be the undying trophies of the tenth Leo, which, consecrated to eternal memory by the writings of learned men, will forever render your pontificate and your family<sup>||</sup> illustrious. I pray God that he may be pleased to confirm this purpose in you, and so protract your life, that after the affairs of mankind have been ordered according to your designs, Leo may make a long-delayed return to the skies.

### Questions for Analysis

1. What does Erasmus mean by a “golden age”? What are its characteristics?
2. Does education and learning ensure improvement in the human condition?
3. What would you say are the essential differences between Erasmus’s educational goals and those of modern society?

<sup>||</sup>The Florentine House of Medici, whose interests Leo X, himself a Medici, was known always to support.

Source: *The Portable Renaissance Reader*, ed. James Bruce Ross and Mary Martin McLaughlin (New York: Penguin Books, 1981), pp. 80–84.