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VI. Renaissance Humanism

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VI. Renaissance Humanism

Abstract

Between the end of the High Middle Ages (about 1350) and the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century, the character of Western Civilization was profoundly altered. Earlier chapters have already told how most institutions and values characteristic of the High Middle Ages began to disintegrate. Meanwhile, other institutions and ideas, many of which we think of as modern, gradually came to the fore. The intensification of this process of transition from medieval to modern is called the Renaissance. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Contemporary Civilization, Renaissance

Disciplines

Cultural History | History | Medieval History

Comments

This is a part of [Section VI: Renaissance Humanism](#). The [Contemporary Civilization](#) page lists all additional sections of *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, as well as the [Table of Contents](#) for both volumes.

More About Contemporary Civilization:

From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of "introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages."

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called *An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems*. A second edition, retitled *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker '66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

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VI. RENAISSANCE HUMANISM

Between the end of the High Middle Ages (about 1350) and the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century, the character of Western Civilization was profoundly altered. Earlier chapters have already told how most institutions and values characteristic of the High Middle Ages began to disintegrate. Meanwhile, other institutions and ideas, many of which we think of as modern, gradually came to the fore. The intensification of this process of transition from medieval to modern is called the Renaissance.

The term "Renaissance" is as unsatisfactory as that other bit of historiographic shorthand, the Dark Ages. It has already been noted that the latter was coined by a later age to express contempt for what was supposed to have been a period of unrelieved barbarism. Likewise, the term "Renaissance" was an invention of those who thought that the key to this period was the renaissance (renascence, rebirth) of the study of classical Latin and Greek. Although historians now spurn this interpretation, they use the label "Renaissance" to denote a transitional movement that mingled characteristics of both its medieval forerunners and its modern heirs, yet had a special style all its own.

The Renaissance appeared first in Italy, which once again became for a time the leader of Western Civilization. There, starting in the fourteenth century, men with a new world outlook, armed with the new wealth of the Italian cities, brushed aside elements of their medieval past and concurrently released new creative movements. By the middle of the fifteenth century certain aspects of the Renaissance were spreading north of the Alps, where a different environment produced a related but distinctive movement.

Nowhere was the appearance of the Renaissance either sudden or complete. Without denying the achievements of the Renaissance, one may say that from the Middle Ages it inherited both its central problem and some of the elements for a solution. The problem was the need for new institutions and patterns of thought to supplant or refurbish such decaying features of medieval life as scholasticism, the Church, feudalism, and manorial economy. Elements for a solution of this problem were certain facets of the medieval world to which the Renaissance now gave a new emphasis. Urban centers and international trade were well established by 1300. By the same date feudal monarchies had made noteworthy progress in strengthening the central

government at the expense of feudal decentralization. Perva-
sive though the influence of the medieval Church was in the
high noon of its power, a persistent strand of anticlericalism
-- and even secularism -- ran through everyday life in the
Middle Ages. That characteristic medieval phenomenon, the
Crusades, can be seen to have been a significant forerunner of
those overseas ventures which opened up the New World. Despite
the abstract and nonrepresentational elements in medieval art,
the carving in wood and stone in medieval cathedrals and the
pictures in medieval manuscripts often reveal the craftsman's
eye for realistic detail. Finally, medieval universities had
long recognized the value of certain Greco-Roman classics; late
medieval philosophers had already suggested some of the key ways
to attack scholasticism; and medieval logicians had developed
tools for critical analysis. In these and other aspects of the
medieval world the Renaissance found some of the materials with
which it built with such zest and imagination.

[It has been said that certain conflicting elements are
 present in all stages of the development of Western Civiliza-
 tion. Worldliness and otherworldliness, individualism and col-
 lectivism, change and permanence, credulity and skepticism, the
 cults of realism and of the abstract, localism and a larger
 perspective, freedom and authority, the rule of law and rule by
 force, production for one's own use and production for exchange
 -- all exist side by side in every age. What gives each age its
 distinctive flavor is the way it strikes its own balance, com-
 bining these and other elements in unique proportions. Conse-
 quently, after recognizing the extent of the debt owed by the
 Renaissance to its medieval forebears, one must still emphasize
 that in the Renaissance something new, vital, and exciting was
 produced. Renaissance man was a descendant of medieval man with
no more than a family likeness.