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THE
RENAISSANCE

A Very Short Introduction

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Introduction

An Old Master

National museums and art galleries are the most obvious places to go to understand what we mean when we talk about ‘The Renaissance’. Most visitors to London’s National Gallery fail to leave without seeing one of the most famous works of art in its collection – Hans Holbein’s *The Ambassadors*, dated 1533. For many people Holbein’s painting is an abiding image of the European Renaissance. But what is it that makes Holbein’s painting such a recognizably ‘Renaissance’ image?

The Ambassadors portrays two elegantly dressed men, surrounded by the paraphernalia of 16th-century life. Holbein’s lovingly detailed, precise depiction of the world of these Renaissance men, who stare back at the viewer with a confident, but also questioning self-awareness, is an image that has arguably not been seen before in painting. Medieval art looks much more alien, as it lacks this powerfully self-conscious creation of individuality. Even if it is difficult to grasp the motivation for the range of emotions expressed in paintings like Holbein’s, it is still possible to identify with these emotions as recognizably ‘modern’. In other words, when we look at paintings like *The Ambassadors*, we are seeing the emergence of modern identity and individuality.

This is a useful start in trying to understand Holbein’s painting as an artistic manifestation of the Renaissance. But already some

and communities through war and disease, because they were unprepared for or uninterested in adopting European beliefs and ways of living. Along with the cultural, scientific, and technological achievements of the period came religious intolerance, political ignorance, slavery, and massive inequalities in wealth and status – what has been called ‘the darker side of the Renaissance’.

Politics and empire

This leads to other crucial dimensions of the Renaissance addressed in Holbein’s painting, and which define both its sitters and the objects: power, politics, and empire. To understand the importance of these issues and how they emerge in the painting, we need to know some more about its subjects. Dinteville and Selve were in England in 1533 on the orders of the French King Francis I. King Henry VIII had secretly married Anne Boleyn and was threatening to leave the Catholic Church if the pope refused to grant him a divorce from his first wife. Dinteville and Selve were trying to prevent Henry’s split from Rome and act as Francis’s intermediaries in the negotiations. So while this painting, like much of the history of the Renaissance, is about relations between men, it is noticeable that at the heart of this image is a dispute over a woman who is absent, but whose presence is powerfully felt in its objects and surroundings. The insistent attempts by men to silence women only drew more attention to their complicated status within a patriarchal society: women were denied the benefits of many of the cultural and social developments of the Renaissance, but were key to its functioning as the bearers of male heirs to perpetuate its male-dominated culture.

Dinteville and Selve were also in London to broker a new political alliance between Henry, Francis, and the Ottoman Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent, the other great power in European politics of the time. The rug on the upper shelf of the table in Holbein’s painting is of Ottoman design and manufacture, suggesting that the Ottomans

and their territories to the east were also part of the cultural, commercial, and political landscape of the Renaissance. Selve and Dinteville's attempt to draw Henry VIII into an alliance with Francis and Süleyman was motivated by their fear of the growing strength of that other great Renaissance imperial power, the Habsburg empire of Charles V. By comparison, England and France were minor imperial players: the terrestrial globe in the painting says as much. It shows the European empires beginning to carve up the newly discovered world. Holbein's globe reproduces the line of demarcation established by the empires of Spain and Portugal in 1494, following Columbus's 'discovery' of America.

This demarcation was made in response to a dispute over territories in the Far East. Both Spain and Portugal were struggling for possession of the remote but highly lucrative spice-producing islands of the Indonesian archipelago, the Moluccas. In the Renaissance, Europe placed itself at the centre of the terrestrial globe, but it looked towards the wealth of the east, from the textiles and silks of the Ottoman Empire to the spices and pepper of the Indonesian archipelago. Many of the objects in Holbein's painting have an eastern origin, from the silk and velvet worn by its subjects to the textiles and designs that decorate the room.

The objects in the bottom section of Holbein's painting reveal various facets of the Renaissance – humanism, religion, printing, trade, exploration, politics and empire, and the enduring presence of the wealth and knowledge of the east. The objects on the upper shelf deal with much more abstract and philosophical issues. The celestial globe is an astronomical instrument used to measure the stars and the nature of the universe. Next to the globe is a collection of dials, used to tell the time with the aid of the sun's rays. The two larger objects are a quadrant and a torquetum, navigational instruments used to work out a ship's position in both time and space. Most of these instruments were invented by Arab and Jewish astronomers and came westwards as European travellers required navigational expertise for long-distance voyages. They reflect an

intensified interest within the Renaissance in understanding and mastering the natural world. As Renaissance philosophers debated the nature of their world, navigators, instrument-makers, and scientists began to channel these philosophical debates into practical solutions to natural problems. The results were objects such as those in Holbein's painting.

Finally, consider the oblique image that slashes across the bottom of the painting. Viewed straight on, it is impossible to make out the meaning of this distorted shape. However, if the viewer stands at an angle to the painting, the image metamorphoses into a perfectly drawn skull. This was a fashionable perspective trick, known as anamorphosis, used by several Renaissance artists. Art historians have argued that this is a *vanitas* image, a chilling reminder that in the midst of all this wealth, power, and learning, death comes to us all. But the skull also appears to represent Holbein's own artistic initiative, regardless of the requirements of his patron. It shows him breaking free of his identity as a skilled artisan and asserting the growing power and autonomy of the painter as an artist to experiment with new techniques and theories such as optics and geometry in creating innovative painted images.

Where and when was the Renaissance?

The Renaissance is usually associated with the Italian city states like Florence, but Italy's undoubted importance has too often overshadowed the development of new ideas in northern Europe, the Iberian peninsula, the Islamic world, south-east Asia, and Africa. In offering a more global perspective on the nature of the Renaissance, it would be more accurate to refer to a series of 'Renaissances' throughout these regions, each with their own highly specific and separate characteristics. These other Renaissances often overlapped and exchanged influences with the more classical and traditionally understood Renaissance centred on Italy. The Renaissance was a remarkably international, fluid, and mobile phenomenon.

Today, there is a popular consensus that the term ‘Renaissance’ refers to a profound and enduring upheaval and transformation in culture, politics, art, and society in Europe between the years 1400 and 1600. The word describes both a period in history and a more general ideal of cultural renewal. The term comes from the French for ‘rebirth’. Since the 19th century it has been used to describe the period in European history when the rebirth of intellectual and artistic appreciation of Graeco-Roman culture gave rise to the modern individual as well as the social and cultural institutions that define so many people in the western world today.

Art historians often view the Renaissance as beginning as early as the 13th century, with the art of Giotto and Cimabue, and ending in the late 16th century with the work of Michelangelo and Venetian painters like Titian. Literary scholars in the Anglo-American world take a very different perspective, focusing on the rise of vernacular English literature in the 16th and 17th centuries in the poetry and drama of Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton. Historians take a different approach again, labelling the period *c.*1500–1700 as ‘early modern’, rather than ‘Renaissance’. These differences in dating and even naming the Renaissance have become so intense that the validity of the term is now in doubt. Does it have any meaning any more? Is it possible to separate the Renaissance from the Middle Ages that preceded it, and the modern world that came after it? Does it underpin a belief in European cultural superiority? To answer these questions, we need to understand how the term ‘Renaissance’ itself came into being.

No 16th-century audience would have recognized the term ‘Renaissance’. The Italian word *rinascita* (‘rebirth’) was used in the 16th century to refer to the revival of classical culture. But the specific French word ‘Renaissance’ was not used as a descriptive historical phrase until the middle of the 19th century. The first person to use the term was the French historian Jules Michelet, a French nationalist deeply committed to the egalitarian principles of the French Revolution. Between 1833 and 1862 Michelet

worked on his greatest project, the multi-volume *History of France*. He was a progressive republican, vociferous in his condemnation of both the aristocracy and the church. In 1855 he published his seventh volume of the *History*, entitled *La Renaissance*. For him the Renaissance meant:

... the discovery of the world and the discovery of man. The sixteenth century ... went from Columbus to Copernicus, from Copernicus to Galileo, from the discovery of the earth to that of the heavens. Man refound himself.

The Renaissance

The scientific discoveries of explorers and thinkers like Columbus, Copernicus, and Galileo went hand in hand with more philosophical definitions of individuality that Michelet identified in the writings of Rabelais, Montaigne, and Shakespeare. This new spirit was contrasted with what Michelet viewed as the 'bizarre and monstrous' quality of the Middle Ages. To him the Renaissance represented a progressive, democratic condition that celebrated the great virtues he valued – Reason, Truth, Art, and Beauty. According to Michelet, the Renaissance 'recognized itself as identical at heart with the modern age'.

Michelet was the first thinker to define the Renaissance as a decisive historical period in European culture that represented a crucial break with the Middle Ages, and which created a modern understanding of humanity and its place in the world. He also promoted the Renaissance as representing a certain spirit or attitude, as much as referring to a specific historical period. Michelet's Renaissance does not happen in Italy in the 14th and 15th centuries, as we have come to expect. Instead, his Renaissance takes place in the 16th century. As a French nationalist, Michelet was eager to claim the Renaissance as a French phenomenon. As a republican he also rejected what he saw as 14th-century Italy's admiration for church and political tyranny as deeply undemocratic, and hence not part of the spirit of the Renaissance.

Michelet's story of the Renaissance was shaped decisively by his own 19th-century circumstances. In fact, the values of Michelet's Renaissance sound strikingly close to those of his cherished French Revolution: espousing the values of freedom, reason, and democracy, rejecting political and religious tyranny, and enshrining the spirit of freedom and the dignity of 'man'. Disappointed in the failure of these values in his own time, Michelet went in search of a historical moment where the values of liberty and egalitarianism triumphed and promised a modern world free of tyranny.

Swiss Renaissance

Michelet invented the idea of the Renaissance; but the Swiss academic Jacob Burckhardt defined it as an Italian 15th-century phenomenon. In 1860 Burckhardt published *The Civilisation of the Renaissance in Italy*. He argued that the peculiarities of political life in late 15th-century Italy led to the creation of a recognizably modern individuality. The revival of classical antiquity, the discovery of the wider world, and the growing unease with organized religion meant 'man became a spiritual *individual*'. Burckhardt deliberately contrasted this new development with the lack of individual awareness that for him defined the Middle Ages. Here, 'Man was conscious of himself only as a member of a race, people, party, family or corporation.' In other words, prior to the 15th century, people lacked a powerful sense of their individual identity. For Burckhardt, 15th-century Italy gave birth to 'Renaissance Man', what he called 'the first-born among the sons of modern Europe'. The result was what has become the now familiar account of the Renaissance: the birthplace of the modern world, created by Petrarch, Alberti, and Leonardo, characterized by the revival of classical culture, and over by the middle of the 16th century.

Burckhardt says very little about Renaissance art or economic changes, and overestimates what he sees as the sceptical, even 'pagan' approach to religion of the day. His focus is exclusively on

Italy; he makes no attempt to see the Renaissance in relation to other cultures. His understanding of the terms 'individuality' and 'modern' also remain extremely vague. Like Michelet, Burckhardt's vision of the Renaissance reads like a version of his own personal circumstances. Burckhardt was an intellectual aristocrat, proud of his Protestant and republican Swiss individualism. He feared the growth of industrial democracy and what he saw as its destruction of artistic beauty. His subsequent vision of the Renaissance as a period where art and life were united, republicanism was celebrated but limited, and religion was tempered by the state sounds like an idealized vision of his beloved Basle. Nevertheless, in arguing that the Renaissance is the foundation of modern life, Burckhardt's book has remained at the heart of Renaissance studies ever since; often criticized, but never completely dismissed.

Michelet and Burckhardt's celebrations of art and individuality as defining features of the Renaissance found their logical conclusion in England in Walter Pater's study *The Renaissance*, first published in 1873. Pater was an Oxford-educated don and aesthete, who used his study of the Renaissance as a vehicle for his belief in 'the love of art for its own sake'. Pater rejected the political, scientific, and economic aspects of the Renaissance as irrelevant, and saw 'a spirit of rebellion and revolt against the moral and religious ideas of the time' in the art of 15th-century painters like Botticelli, Leonardo, and Giorgione. This was an aesthetic, hedonistic, even pagan celebration of what Pater called 'the pleasures of the senses and the imagination'. He found traces of this 'love of the things of the intellect and the imagination for their own sake' as early as the 12th and as late as the 17th century. Many were scandalized by what they saw as Pater's decadent and irreligious book, but his views shaped the English-speaking world's view of the Renaissance for decades.

Michelet, Burckhardt, and Pater created a 19th-century idea of the Renaissance as more of a *spirit* than a historical period. The achievements of art and culture revealed a new attitude towards individuality and what it meant to be 'civilized'. The problem with

this way of defining the Renaissance was that, rather than offering an accurate historical account of what took place from the 15th century onwards, it looked more like an ideal of 19th-century European society. These critics celebrated limited democracy, scepticism towards the church, the power of art and literature, and the triumph of European civilization over all others. These values underpinned 19th-century European imperialism. At a point in history that Europe was aggressively asserting its authority over most of the Americas, Africa, and Asia, people like Pater were creating a vision of the Renaissance that seemed to offer both an origin and a justification for European dominance over the rest of the globe.

20th-century Renaissance

A far more ambivalent view of the Renaissance emerged in the early 20th-century. One of the earliest challenges to Burckhardt came in 1919, with the publication of Johan Huizinga's *The Waning of the Middle Ages*. Huizinga looked at how northern European culture and society had been neglected in previous definitions of the Renaissance. He challenged Burckhardt's period division between 'Middle Ages' and 'Renaissance', arguing that the style and attitude that Burckhardt identified as 'Renaissance' was in fact the waning or declining spirit of the Middle Ages. Huizinga offered as an example the 15th-century Flemish art of Jan van Eyck:

Both in form and in idea it is a product of the waning Middle Ages. If certain historians of art have discovered Renaissance elements in it, it is because they have confounded, very wrongly, realism and Renaissance. Now this scrupulous realism, this aspiration to render exactly all natural details, is the characteristic feature of the spirit of the expiring Middle Ages.

The detailed visual realism of van Eyck's painting represents for Huizinga the end of a medieval tradition, not the birth of a Renaissance spirit of heightened artistic expression. While

Huizinga did not reject the use of the term ‘Renaissance’, there remained little left of the idea that he did not see emanating from the Middle Ages. Huizinga’s book offered a very pessimistic view of the ideal of the Renaissance celebrated by his 19th-century predecessors. Written in the midst of the First World War, it is hardly surprising that it could summon little enthusiasm for the idea of the Renaissance as the flowering of the superiority of European individuality and ‘civilization’.

The mid-20th century witnessed a profound reappraisal of the Renaissance by a group of Central European intellectual émigrés writing at a time when the rise of totalitarianism threatened to undermine the humane philosophical values of Renaissance humanism. German scholars, including Paul Oscar Kristeller, Hans Baron, and Erwin Panofsky, fled the rise of fascism in the 1930s and went into exile in the United States. Their subsequent work on the Renaissance was deeply affected by these events, and continues to influence contemporary studies of the period.

Hans Baron’s *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance* (1955) argued that one of the defining moments in Renaissance humanism emerged in Florence as a result of the second Milanese war (1397–1402). For Baron, the moment when the Milanese Duke Giangaleazzo Visconti prepared to attack Florence in 1402, resembled ‘events in modern history when unifying conquest loomed over Europe’. Comparing Giangaleazzo to Napoleon and Hitler, Baron concluded that such modern analogies helped to understand ‘the crisis of the summer of 1402 and grasp its material and psychological significance for the political history of the Renaissance, and in particular for the growth of the Florentine civic spirit’. Giangaleazzo was struck down by the plague in September 1402, and Florence was saved. For Baron, the great hero of what he characterized as the triumph of civic republicanism over feudal autocracy was the scholar and statesman Leonardo Bruni. According to Baron, in his *Panegyric to the City of Florence* and *History of the Florentine People*, Bruni expressed a ‘new philosophy

of political engagement and active life, developed in opposition to ideals of scholarly withdrawal'. This represented Baron's definition of civic humanism, which 'endeavoured to educate a man as a member of his society and state', and embraced the republican virtues which Baron saw represented by Medici Florence.

Baron's thesis was an attractive response to the role of the humane thinker at a time when Europe was threatened with the rise of political totalitarianism, and it decisively placed Florence and the Medici at the heart of the origins of the Renaissance. But it also idealized Bruni's humanism and Florence's republicanism. Paul Oscar Kristeller took a different approach to Baron. For Kristeller, it was the speculative philosophy of the Florentine humanist Marsilio Ficino, and in particular his *Platonic Theology* (written between 1469 and 1473), that defined a new fusion of the classical world and Christianity. For Kristeller, Ficino's innovation was the belief that

philosophy now stands free and equal beside religion, but it neither can nor may conflict with religion, because their agreement is guaranteed by a common origin and content. This is no doubt one of those concepts with which Ficino pointed the way to the future.

Ficino's Platonism carefully negotiated the tense relations between philosophy, religion and the state – relations that were also particularly fraught in Europe in the 1930s and 40s when Kristeller was working on Ficino.

In the aftermath of the Second World War and the social and political upheavals of the 1960s, particularly the politicization of the humanities and the rise of feminism, the Renaissance was subjected to a profound reappraisal. One particularly influential response came from the United States. In 1980 the literary scholar Stephen Greenblatt published his book *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*. The book built on Burckhardt's view of the Renaissance as the point at which modern man was born. Drawing on psychoanalysis, anthropology, and social history, Greenblatt

argued that the 16th century witnessed ‘an increased self-consciousness about the fashioning of human identity’. Men (and on occasion women) learnt to manipulate or ‘fashion’ their identities according to their circumstances. Like Burckhardt, Greenblatt saw this as the beginnings of a peculiarly modern phenomenon. For Greenblatt, the literature of the great writers of 16th-century England – Edmund Spenser, Christopher Marlowe, and William Shakespeare – produced fictional characters like Faustus and Hamlet who began self-consciously to reflect on and manipulate their own identities. In this respect they started to look and sound like modern men. The painting that Greenblatt used to introduce his theory of self-fashioning was none other than Hans Holbein’s *The Ambassadors*.

Greenblatt concluded that in the Renaissance ‘the human subject itself began to seem remarkably unfree, the ideological product of the relations of power in a particular society’. Writing as an American, Greenblatt has subsequently explored both his admiration for the achievements of the Renaissance and his anxiety with its darker side, most specifically for him the colonization of the New World and the anti-Semitism found throughout the 16th century.

Despite the title of Greenblatt’s book, he and others began to use the expression ‘the early modern period’ to define the Renaissance. The term came from social history and proposed a more sceptical relationship between the Renaissance and the modern world than the idealistic accounts of Michelet and Burckhardt. It also stressed the idea of the Renaissance as a period of history, rather than the cultural ‘spirit’ proposed by 19th-century writers. The term ‘early modern’ still suggested that what took place between 1400 and 1600 deeply influenced and affected the modern world. Instead of focusing on how the Renaissance itself looked back to the classical world, ‘early modern’ suggests that the period involved a forward-looking attitude that prefigured our own modern world.

The concept of the early modern period also enabled an exploration of topics and subjects not previously thought fit for consideration in relation to the Renaissance. Scholars like Greenblatt and Natalie Zemon Davis in her book *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (1975) explored the social roles of peasants, artisans, transvestites, and ‘unruly’ women. As intellectual disciplines such as anthropology, literature, and history learnt from each other’s theoretical insights, the focus on excluded groups and marginalized objects increased. Categories such as ‘witch’, ‘Jew’, and ‘black’ were subjected to renewed scrutiny, as critics sought to recover neglected or lost voices from the Renaissance.

Critics like Greenblatt and Zemon Davis were also influenced by late 20th-century philosophical and theoretical thinking, most decisively that of post-structuralism and postmodernism. These approaches were sceptical of the ‘grand narratives’ of historical change, from Renaissance to Enlightenment and into Modernity. Thinkers as diverse as Theodor Adorno and Michel Foucault argued that the humane, civilized values they identified as originating in the Renaissance had little response to or were even possibly complicit with the catastrophes of the political experiments of Nazism and Stalinism and the horrors of the Holocaust and the Soviet Gulags. As a result, few late 20th-century thinkers had any appetite for celebrating the grand cultural and philosophical achievements of the Renaissance. Instead, many historians began to analyse things and objects at a much more local level.

Similarly, everyday objects, meaningful to everyday life, but subsequently lost or destroyed, were invested with renewed importance. Instead of focusing on painting, sculpture, and architecture, scholars from various disciplines began to investigate how the material significance of furniture, food, clothing, ceramics, and other apparently mundane objects shaped the Renaissance world. Instead of seeing similarities, these approaches suggested the gulf between the Renaissance and the modern world. Objects and personal identities were not fixed and unchangeable, as

Burckhardt had implied in his celebration of ‘modern’ man: they were fluid and contingent.

The legacy of the Renaissance in the 21st century remains as contested as ever. Since the attacks on the USA in September 2001, the rhetoric of the clash of civilizations between east and west has taken its lead from the assumption that the Renaissance represented the global triumph of the superior values of western humanity. However, as we will see in the next chapter, the origins of the Renaissance were far more culturally mixed than these claims would suggest, and its impact spread far beyond the shores of Europe.