

How Did the Renaissance Change Man's View of Man?

The Renaissance was a period of big change in European history. It was a time of intellectual excitement, when art and literature blossomed and groundbreaking scientific advances were made. Over the course of about 300 years, the Renaissance spread from its home base in Italy to western and northern Europe. The effect was like a sunrise making its way across the land.

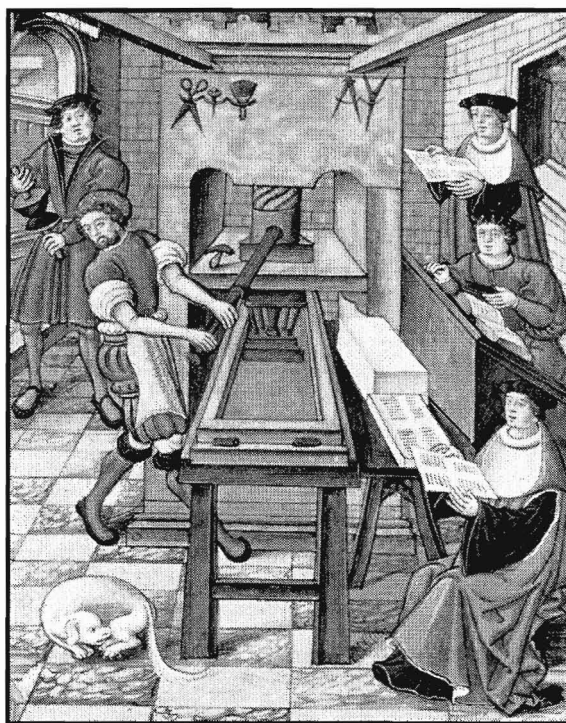
To understand the changes the Renaissance produced, it helps to review what European society was like before it arrived. The time period before the Renaissance is usually called the **Middle Ages**, which stretched from the fall of the Roman Empire around 500 CE to about 1350. During the Middle Ages, the Roman Catholic Church and the Pope were the primary players in Europe. The custodians of culture – that is, the people who owned most of the books and made handwritten copies of the Bible – were priests who often lived a closed existence inside the walls of **monasteries**. Schools were few. **Illiteracy** was widespread. Most of the population, more than 85 percent, was peasant farmers called **serfs** who worked for a lord and his estate. Serfs were little more than slaves. Both serfs and their masters looked to the Catholic Church and the Bible to explain the world. The art and literature that existed focused on Jesus Christ and sin.

In the 1300s, important changes began to happen. Improved farming methods helped

peasants become more self-sufficient. More and more serfs gained their freedom and no longer depended on lords. Some freed serfs migrated to towns, where they took up trades. The number of merchants and bankers increased. Since these people needed to have an education to effectively carry on their work, literacy spread. Eventually, educated people began to question the teachings of the Church. A movement called **humanism** developed, which praised the beauty and intelligence of the individual.

As more people became educated, humanism worked its way into the arts, literature, the sciences, and medicine.

The early Renaissance was especially vigorous in the city-states of Italy – places like Rome, Venice, Florence, and Milan. The invention of the printing press in the mid-1400s gave the Renaissance and humanism even more momentum. Initially, the Renaissance was an upper-middle class movement, but thanks to the mechanization of printing, shopkeepers and street sweepers were able



to afford books and articles that discussed the new ideas spreading across Europe. As a result, people started to look at themselves in a new way.

But what, exactly, was this new way? Examine the documents that follow and answer the question: *How did the Renaissance change man's view of man?*

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Background Essay Questions

1. What is the meaning of the word “renaissance”? Describe the time period known as the Renaissance.
2. In general terms, how would you describe the Middle Ages?
3. Why did education start to increase during the 1300s?
4. Why was the printing press so important to the spread of the Renaissance and humanist thinking?
5. Define these terms:

Middle Ages

monasteries

illiteracy

serfs

humanism

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- 1324 CE** – Mansa Musa begins Hajj to Mecca.
 - 1433** – Zheng He makes a final voyage to Africa.
 - 1453** – Byzantine Empire falls.
 - 1455** – Gutenberg prints 180 Bibles.
 - 1503** – Leonardo da Vinci completes the *Mona Lisa*.
 - 1521** – Magellan dies in the Philippines.
 - 1601** – Shakespeare writes *Hamlet*.

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