Humanism and its influence on the Literature of the Italian Renaissance

Before we study the literature, art, and architecture of the Italian Renaissance, it is vital to be able to define Humanism and to identify the values of Humanism.

What was Humanism?

Humanism was the scholarly study of the Latin and Greek classics and of early Christian manuscripts, both for the joy of learning itself, and in the hope that knowledge gained would be useful in contemporary society. At its core, Humanism was an educational program. Unlike medieval scholasticism which emphasized theology, the *studia humanitatis* embraced Greek, Latin, history, rhetoric (public speaking), literature, philosophy, and politics. Ancient texts were to be studied in their original language and context and not through a scholastic prism (as Thomas Aquinas had done with Aristotle's writings in the 13th century). Humanists didn't care whether several angels could be in the same place at the same time! They wanted to learn how Cicero refined Latin into a language capable of expressing complex ideas.

What values did Humanism stress?

1. *Love of Classical Antiquity*. Classical (ancient Greek and Roman) literature, law, philosophy, politics, sculpture, architecture, and mythology, are important sources of knowledge and inspiration. The literature, art, sculpture and architecture of the Renaissance borrowed heavily from classical antiquity.

2. *Individualism.* As their name suggests, humanists were fascinated by humans and their potential. During the Middle Ages, Christian humility discouraged talented people from being self-absorbed. Taking pride in one's accomplishments was frowned upon. After all, Pride was listed as one of the Seven Deadly Sins. In contrast, Renaissance individualism stressed personality, uniqueness, genius, and the full development of one's capabilities and talents. Artists, scholars, sculptors, etc., should always strive to fully realize their ability. Furthermore, Humanism emphasized the complete human – body and soul. During the Middle Ages, the focus was on the soul and the body was seen as a path to corruption. Humanism returned to celebrating the beauty of the human physical form.

3. *Secularism.* During the Middle Ages, the main focus was on faith and the afterlife. Renaissance secularism shifted the focus to this material world. Humanists encouraged the acquisition of knowledge through the senses (seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, and smelling). In other words, they paid attention to the details of this world. They sought to learn how things actually are in this world. In painting and sculpture this was called **Naturalism** as objects were depicted as they exist in nature. While Humanism emphasized the secular and not the religious, it is important to remember that humanists were all practicing Catholics. Many of their books, paintings and sculptures were of religious subjects but they were built on a better

understanding of the material world (the human body, human institutions, human behavior, etc.)

4. *Civic Humanism.* Humanists believed that education should improve society. The ruling elites should be well educated, for with education comes wisdom, virtue, and morality. Literature, art, sculpture, and architecture should have positive effects on civil society.

Humanist Values reflected in Renaissance Literature

Oration on the Dignity of Man by Pico della Mirandola

The young Pico della Mirandola (he died at age 31) considered himself to be the most educated man in Europe! At age 23 he challenged all scholars to debate him on 900 theses he had written on law, philosophy, religion, and ethics. His *Oration on the Dignity of Man* was written as an introduction to his 900 theses. It is considered a key text of Renaissance humanism:

… God therefore accepted man as a work of indeterminate nature, and placing him in the center of the universe, addressed him thus:

"O Adam, I have given you neither a place nor a form nor any ability exclusively your own, so that according to your wishes and your judgment, you have and possess whatever place, form, or abilities you desire. The nature of all other beings is limited and constrained in accordance with the laws prescribed by Me. Constrained by no limits, in accordance with your own free will, which I have given to you, you shall independently determine the bounds of your own nature. I have placed you at the center of the universe from where you may more easily observe whatever is in the universe. I have made you neither celestial not terrestrial, neither mortal nor immortal, so that with honor and freedom of choice, as though the maker and molder of yourself, you may fashion yourself in whatever form you prefer….You shall have the freedom to rise to the level of angels or descend to the level of brutish animals."

Who would not admire this, our chameleon? Or who could admire any other being more greatly than man? … From the moment we are born, we are born into the condition of being able to become whatever we choose.

Book of The Courtier by Baldassare Castiglione

Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier* was essentially an advice manual for the nobles who sought positions at the court of their ruling prince. During the Middle Ages, it might have been sufficient for nobles to simply be good warriors. During the more sophisticated Age of the Renaissance, however, nobles who weren't multi-skilled were of little use to a Prince:

You ask me then to write what is to my thinking most befitting a gentleman who lives at the court of princes, by which he may have the ability and knowledge perfectly to serve them in every reasonable thing, winning for them favor and praise from other men; in short, what manner of man he ought to be who may deserve to be called a perfect Courtier without flaw.

… I would have the Courtier well built and shapely of limb, and would have him show strength and lightness and suppleness, and know all bodily exercises that befit a man of war: whereof I think the first should be to handle every sort of weapon well on foot and on horse, to understand the advantages of each, and especially to be familiar with those weapons that are ordinarily used among gentlemen; for besides the use of them in war, there frequently arise differences between one gentleman and another, which afterwards result in duels.

… I think what is chiefly important and necessary for the Courtier, in order to speak and write well, is knowledge; for he who is ignorant and has nothing in his mind that merits being heard, can neither say it nor write it.

… But all these things would be vain and of small moment, if the thoughts expressed by the words were not beautiful, ingenious, acute, elegant, and grave – according to the need … And when he is speaking on an obscure or difficult subject, I would have him carefully explain his meaning with precision of both word and thought, and make every ambiguity clear and plain with a certain touch of unpedantic care. Likewise, where there is occasion, let him know how to speak with dignity and force, to arouse those emotions which are part of our nature, and to kindle them or to move them according to the need.

… The Courtier must accompany his actions, words, gestures, habits, in short, his every movement, with grace, without which all other properties and good qualities are of little worth … I say that whoever would acquire grace in bodily exercises ought to begin early and learn the fundamentals from the best teachers. And how important this seemed to King Philip of Macedonia may be seen from the fact that he chose Aristotle, the famous philosopher and perhaps the greatest there has ever been in the world, to teach his son Alexander the first elements of letters.

<u>Donation of Constantine</u> by Lorenzo Valla

The humanist, Lorenzo Valla, was well known for his critical analysis of manuscripts purporting to be originals. By carefully analyzing the words and sentence structure, Valla could accurately date documents to a particular time period and, thus, expose forgeries. His most famous exposé was of a manuscript titled T*he Donation of Constantine*. This manuscript, supposedly written by the Roman Emperor Constantine (r. 307-337), granted vast territories in Central Italy to the Roman Catholic Church. Valla's careful textual analysis revealed that the manuscript was medieval forgery because it contained many words and sentence structures that were unknown to 4th century Romans.

The Prince by Niccolò Machiavelli

In the late 1400s, Niccolò Machiavelli served as a Florentine diplomat at the court of the King of France, at the Vatican, and also at the courts of some of the smaller Italian states. He observed first-hand how rulers operated, and he noted their successes and failures, their strengths and weaknesses. As his interest in the nature of political power grew, he also studied history, paying close attention to how rulers in ancient Greece and Rome wielded power. In 1513, he published a short book titled *The Prince*. In it, he dispensed realistic advice on how rulers come to power and on how they maintain power. He dedicated it to the Medici family in Florence.

The Prince was immediately controversial because Machiavelli rejected Christian morality as a guide to how rulers should behave. He argued that any ruler who tried to maintain high moral standards by always keeping his word, showing mercy and forgiveness, and turning the other cheek would quickly lose his power. The Church, of course, preached that this is how Christians *should* behave, but Machiavelli claimed that in the *real* world, people were selfish, greedy, and would take advantage of a ruler's virtues to challenge his authority. Unlike many of his humanist contemporaries, Machiavelli did not have a positive view of human nature.

... I have thought it useful to represent things as they are in reality, rather than as they are imagined. The gulf between how one should live and how one does live is so wide that a prince who neglects what is actually done for what should be done learns the way to self-destruction rather than self-preservation. The fact is that a prince who wants to act virtuously in every way necessarily comes to grief among so many who are not virtuous. ... Taking everything into account, he will find that some of the things that appear to be virtues (such as generosity, compassion, love, and honesty) will, if he practices them, ruin him, and some of the things that appear to be vices (miserliness, cruelty, fear, deception) will bring him security and prosperity.

Generosity and Miserliness

... A prince who wants a reputation for generosity will have to be ostentatiously lavish, and, acting in that fashion, will soon squander all his resources, only to be forced in the end, if he wants to maintain his reputation, to lay excessive taxes on his people. This will make his subjects hate him. Having injured many and rewarded few, he will be vulnerable to the first major setback he encounters. ... A prince should not mind being called a miser. In time, he will be recognized as being essentially a generous man, seeing that because of his miserliness his existing revenues are enough for him. Someone may object to my advice by saying that Julius Caesar came to power by being generous to his armies, that his soldiers loved him for his generosity. My reply to this is that Caesar campaigned with his armies, pillaging and sacking foreign lands, and he distributed goods that belonged to foreigners. Giving away what belongs to strangers increased his standing with his troops. A prince only hurts himself when he gives away what is his own.

Compassion and Cruelty

... a prince must not worry if he is criticized for his cruelty so long as he keeps his subjects united and loyal. By making an example of those who cause trouble, he will in fact prove himself to be more compassionate than those princes who, being too compassionate, allow disorder which inevitably descend into murders and theft. Disorder harms the whole community, whereas executions only affect individuals. A new prince, above all, finds it impossible to avoid a reputation for cruelty, because of the abundant dangers inherent in a newly acquired state. In the Aeneid, Dido says: "Harsh necessity, and the newness of my kingdom, force me to do such things and to guard my frontiers everywhere."

Love and Fear

... From this arises the following question: whether it is better for a prince to be loved rather than feared, or the reverse. The answer is that one would like to be both, but, because it is difficult to combine them, it is far better to be feared than loved if one cannot be both. One can make this generalization about men: they are ungrateful, fickle, liars, and deceivers; they shun danger and are greedy for profit. ... Men worry less about doing an injury to a prince who makes himself loved, than to a prince who makes himself feared. The bond of love is one which men, wretched creatures that they are, break when it is to their advantage; but fear is strengthened by a dread of punishment which is always effective. ... This can be proved by looking at the Roman general, Scipio. His army mutinied against him in Spain, and the only reason for this was his excessive leniency, which allowed his soldiers more license than was good for military discipline.

The prince must, however, make himself feared in such a way that he avoids being hated. For fear is quite compatible with an absence of hatred. If it proves necessary to execute someone, this is to be done only when there is proper justification and manifest reason. A prince should not execute his subjects arbitrarily. Above all, a prince must not confiscate the property of his subjects. Sons sooner forget the execution of their father than the confiscation of their inheritance.

Honesty and Deception

... a wise prince cannot, and must not, honor his word when it places him at a disadvantage, and when the reasons for which he gave it no longer exist. If all men were good, this principle would be wrong; but because men are wretched creatures who would not keep their word to the prince, the prince need not keep his word to them. ... But a prince must know how to frame his speech and actions and to be an accomplished liar and deceiver.

Humanism and its influence on the Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, and Music of the Italian Renaissance

In the paintings that follow, analyze how they embody some or all of the following Humanist values: a love of classical antiquity, individualism, secularism (non-religious themes; Naturalism – depicting objects as they exist in nature, including the use of depth-perception to capture the three dimension in nature on a two-dimensional canvas), and civic humanism.

***Primavera* by Botticelli**

Painted by Botticelli. Finished in 1482. Size: 80 x 124 inches. Commissioned by the Medici family. Located today in the Uffizi Museum in Florence. Primavera is also known as the Allegory of Spring. It is an elaborate mythological allegory of the burgeoning fertility of the world. On the right, Zephyrus (the biting wind of winter) grabs the nymph, Chloris (a minor female nature deity). Her union with Zephyrus transforms her into Flora (goddess of spring and flowers). She is then pictured in a floral dress scattering flowers throughout the garden. Venus (goddess of love, beauty, fertility), in the center, presides over the garden. On the left, the three Graces (beauty, joy, and charm) dance, unaware that one of them is being targeted by a blindfolded Cupid flying overhead. Cupid was the god of erotic love and desire. On the left, Mercury (god of messages, eloquence, and trade) dissipates the clouds with his staff.

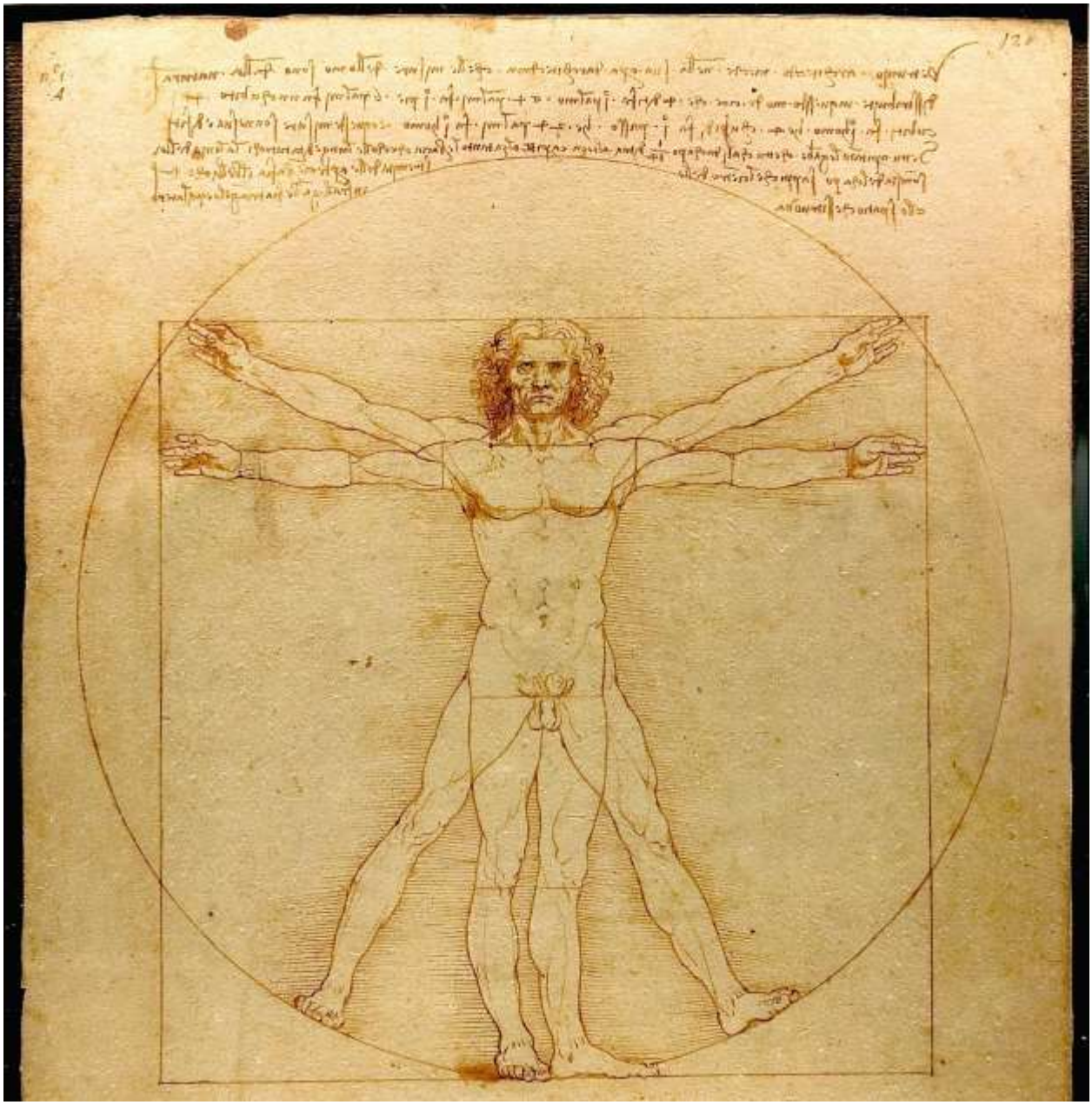
***Birth of Venus* by Botticelli**

Painted by Botticelli. Finished in 1485. Size: 68 x 110 inches. Commissioned by the Medici family. Located today in the Uffizi Museum in Florence. It depicts the Roman goddess Venus (goddess of love, beauty, fertility). Venus has been born at sea and arrives naked on the shore as a fully grown woman. On her left the winds blow gently caressing her hair, on her right a handmaid (Ora) waits to dress her shy body.

***The School of Athens* by Raphael**

Painted by Raphael between 1509 and 1511. A fresco (a wall painting done on fresh plaster so the paint becomes an integral part of the wall). Located in the private residence of the Pope in the Vatican. Size: 17 x 25 feet. Commissioned by Pope Julius II. It is a celebration of the great intellectuals of the classical world. The two figures in the center are Plato (in red) and Aristotle (in blue). Other figures include Socrates, Pythagoras, Euclid, Archimedes, Anaximander, and Ptolemy. The two sculptures in the background are those of Apollo Roman god of light) on the left, and the Roman goddess Minerva (goddess of wisdom) on the right. Raphael included himself in the painting (front row, second from right. He's looking straight at the viewer).

***Vitruvian Man* by Leonardo da Vinci**



An ink on paper drawing by Leonardo da Vinci. It is sometimes called the Canon of Proportions or the Proportions of Man. Completed in 1490. Size: 13 x 10 inches). Today it is located in the Accademia Art Gallery in Venice. It depicts a naked male figure inside a square and a circle. The drawing is based on the correlations of ideal human proportions with geometry described by the ancient Roman architect Vitruvius in the text above the drawing. It includes information such as: the length of the outspread arms is equal to the height of a man; the maximum width of the shoulders is a quarter of the height of a man.

***Mona Lisa* by Leonardo da Vinci**

Begun in 1503 but not completed until 1519. Size 30 x 21 inches. Located today in the Louvre Museum, Paris. Thought to be a portrait of Lisa Gherardini, the wife of Francesco del Giocondo, a wealthy Florentine silk merchant. *Mona* in Italian is a polite form of address originating as *ma donna* —similar to *Ma'am*, *Madam*, or *my lady* in English. In Italy, the painting is called La Gioconda (the jovial one), an obvious pun on the feminine form of Lisa's last name. The subject is seated in a pose artists often used to depict the Virgin Mary. Leonardo uses a technique called *Sfumato*, in which no harsh lines are used to separate colors. Instead, there's a gradual transition – a sort of smoky effect. Behind the woman is an imaginary landscape.

Humanist Values reflected in Renaissance Sculpture

***David* by Donatello**

Completed in the 1440s, this was the first free-standing bronze statue created since classical times. It is not attached to a building and is not part of a group of figures. It was also the first nude statue since ancient Rome. It depicts a youthful, slightly effeminate, David standing on the head of the giant, Goliath. David holds Goliath's sword in his right hand. The Bible says that David went into battle without armor but doesn't say he was naked. This work was commissioned by Cosimo de Medici for his private residence in Florence. The nude statue was a little too controversial to be displayed in a public square. By the end of the 15th century, Florentines were more accustomed to nude statues being displayed in public. The biblical David was a symbol of Florence which had just repelled an attack by the militaristic Duchy of Milan.
Size: 5 feet 2 inches. Location: Bargello Museum, Florence.

***David* by Michelangelo**

Completed in 1504. Carved from a single block of marble. Michelangelo said that he didn't create David; rather he freed David from his marble tomb as one would free a body frozen in ice. Commissioned by Florence city council, it was originally meant to go on the Cathedral, but the council changed its mind and placed it at the entrance of the Palazzo Vecchio – City Hall. Michelangelo uses the classical technique of Contrapposto (counterpose). The weight is all on David's right leg. His left leg is relaxed. This gives the statue a more life-like pose. David has a stone in his right hand and a slingshot in his left. Unlike Donatello's David, it's before he slays Goliath. Michelangelo secretly dissected many cadavers in order to perfect his knowledge of the human body!
Size: 14 feet tall. Location: Academy Gallery, Florence. (copy at the Palazzo Vecchio)

***Pietà* by Michelangelo**

Completed in 1499. Marble. It depicts the dead Christ, having been taken down from the cross, in the lap of his mother. It merges the biblical story with classical ideals of the beauty of the human form. Great attention is paid to the details of Christ's body – the natural pose, the rib cage, the exposed neck, the flesh bulging where Mary's right hand cradles underneath his arm. Mary is young, beautiful, strong and in deep mourning. Her open left hand represents a struggle to understand. Across Mary's chest on a sash are the words: MICHAELA[N]GELUS BONAROTUS FLORENTIN[US] FACIEBA[T] (Michelangelo Buonarroti, Florentine, made this). Michelangelo inserted this later because he heard people were disputing the identity of the sculptor!
Size: 5.5 x 6.5 feet. Location: St. Peter's Basilica, Vatican.

Humanist Values reflected in Renaissance Architecture

The doors of the Baptistery by Ghiberti

Built in the Middle Ages, the octagonal Baptistery was the most beloved building in Florence. After all, this is where all Florentines were baptized. During the Renaissance, the guilds of the city decided to beautify the building. A great deal of discussion centered on the doors. Quite symbolic – a baby entered as a non-baptized soul and exited as a member of the Catholic Church which was his ticket to Heaven when he died. A competition was held to select the best sculptor. The result was a tie between Lorenzo Ghiberti and Filippo Brunelleschi. The commission would be split between them. Brunelleschi stormed off in a huff, believing two geniuses couldn't work together. Brunelleschi went to Rome to study architecture. The 23-year old Ghiberti spent the rest of his life creating and installing stunning gilded bronze panels depicting scenes from the Bible. In true Renaissance style, Ghiberti included a small bust of himself on the east door! Michelangelo said the doors were as beautiful as the Gates of Paradise, and they have been called this ever since.

The doors were created between 1401 and 1452. Today, the doors on the Baptistery are copies. The originals are located in the Duomo (Cathedral) Museum nearby.

The dome of Florence Cathedral by Brunelleschi

Completed between 1420 and 1436. The Cathedral had been started in 1296 and by 1419 was complete except for the dome. No-one had built a dome in Europe since the fall of the Roman Empire. The technique had been lost. It was an embarrassment to the city to have a cathedral open to the elements. Brunelleschi was a superb sculptor but had lost the competition to sculpt new doors for the Baptistery. So, he decided to make a name for himself by designing a dome for the Cathedral! He went to Rome to study the dome of the Pantheon, built by the ancient Romans, and came up with a design he was sure would work in Florence. However, he refused to reveal his plan to Florence city council, fearful that they would steal it and hire someone else to do the job. Instead, Brunelleschi demanded they trust his genius, and, of course, pay him a lot of money. The council was reluctant to give his the commission without seeing the plans. Finally, Cosimo de Medici intervened and Brunelleschi got the green light. Cosimo staked his reputation on Brunelleschi. If the dome collapsed so too might his influence in the city. Of course, the dome didn't fall and in 1436, the completed Cathedral was consecrated by the Pope with great fanfare. Brunelleschi had just built the first dome in Europe in over 1000 years. He had used over 4 million bricks to span a 140 foot wide space. Including the lantern on top, the Cathedral is 375 feet in height. At the time, it was the largest dome ever built. To this day the dome of the Cathedral is called Brunelleschi's Dome.

Villa Rotonda by Palladio

The villa was begun by Andrea Palladio in 1567 and completed by other architects after his death in 1580. It was commissioned by a priest upon his retirement from the Vatican. It is modeled on the Pantheon in Rome. Palladio intended the villa to be a complete celebration of classical architectural styles. It is a perfectly square building with an identical projecting portico on each side. Each portico has six Ionic columns. There are three free-standing statues of Greek and Roman gods on the roof over each portico. In the center of the interior square is a perfect circular room (a rotunda) capped by a dome.

Location: outside Venice.

Note: Andrea Palladio wrote a very influential book explaining the rules of classical architecture. A style of architecture, called Palladian, became very popular throughout Europe, and also, later in the United States. You might be familiar with Thomas Jefferson's home in Monticello, Virginia, which is based on the Villa Rotonda.

Humanist Values reflected in Renaissance Music

Sacred music in the Middle Ages was basically monophonic chant. All-male choirs would sing the same notes together. The aim was to eliminate all individuality and to collectively sound as if only one voice was singing. Praising God was the objective, not celebrating individual human voices.

During the Renaissance, sacred music became polyphonic. Choirs were still all-male, but they now included a wide range of voices, from bass at the lowest end to soprano at the highest end (the high notes were sung by pre-pubescent boys). Beautiful harmonies were created to showcase individual voices.

The two most famous composers in Renaissance Italy were actually born in the Netherlands. Guillaume Dufay (1400-1474) and Josquin des Prez (1440-1521) traveled throughout northern Italy, composing, teaching, and staging concerts. They are primarily responsible for popularizing polyphonic music.