



The Renaissance

By Bennett Sherry

Many people believe the Renaissance was just a European movement. But it had global influences. Let's evaluate global connections in Renaissance art.

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Renaissance narratives

The Renaissance was a cultural movement. It is believed to have started in Florence, Italy in the 1300s. Florence was an Italian city-state. A city-state is a largely independent city. Until the mid-1800s, Italy was not a united country. Over time, Renaissance ideas spread across Europe.

The Renaissance changed European art, architecture, and culture. Artists before were focused on religious subjects. Renaissance artists became interested in real scenes and people. Humanism was another part of the Renaissance. It was an intellectual movement. It believed human ideas were as important as religion. Humanists studied the Greeks and Romans. They combined these ideas with Christian beliefs. Architects imitated the style of Roman and Greek ruins.



The School of Athens, by Raphael adorns one of the walls in the Vatican's Apostolic Palace. The painting features Greek philosophers including Plato and Aristotle. © Getty Images.

The word *Renaissance* comes from the French word for “rebirth.” It was first used in the 1800s. European historians believed the Renaissance made Europe special. They used these ideas to support European empires expanding overseas. They claimed Europe had the best culture and society.

But challenging narratives is central to the work of historians. To evaluate the narratives of the Renaissance, we need to answer some questions: Who participated in the Renaissance? Where did it take place? And why did it start?

Renaissance “man”

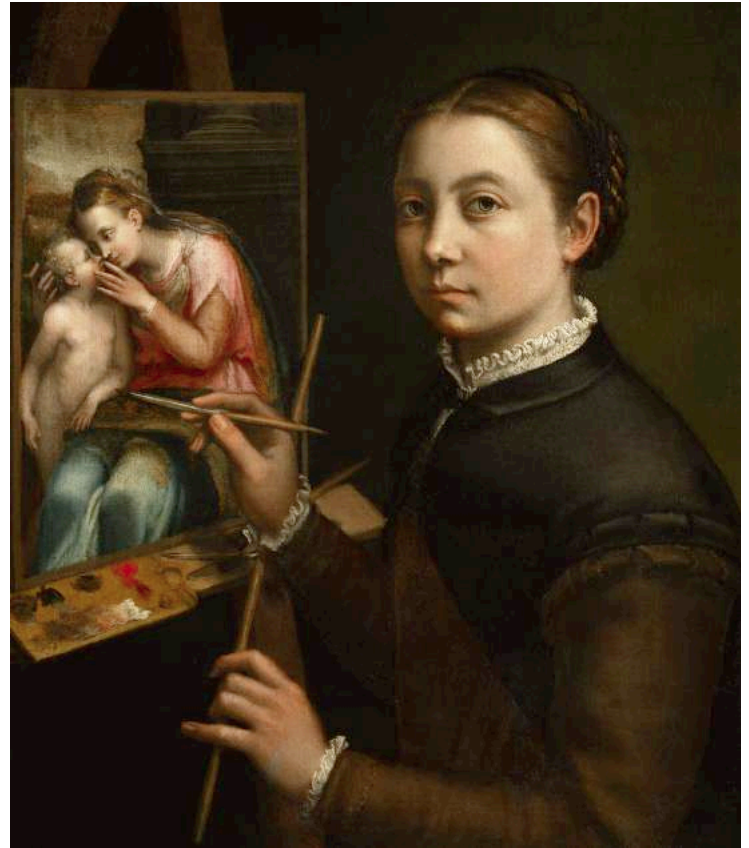
The Renaissance was important. However, most people in Europe were not involved. It was mostly for wealthy and educated men.

Yet, women were not silent in this period. They helped shape the Renaissance. Christine de Pisan is one example. She wrote works of poetry and political theory. Her writing supported women’s education. Other upper class women supported the arts. Some were artists themselves. Today, people use the phrase “Renaissance Man” to describe someone who is educated in many topics. Among the wealthy classes, at least, there were plenty of “Renaissance Women.”

Still, life did not change for most of the population. For most people, changes started by the Renaissance would not be felt for generations.

An economic rebirth

The Renaissance happened as Europe came out of a dark period. The Black Death had killed millions of people. European countries had been at war for years. This created instability and hurt trade. By the 1300s and 1400s, trade networks began to expand.



Self-portrait at the Easel, by Sofonisba Anguissola. © Getty Images.



Adoration of the Magi, by Botticelli (left) and the East Wall of the Magi Chapel in the Palace of the Medici (right), painted by Benozzo Gozzoli. Both paintings depict a religious scene from the Christian Bible, but in each case, the artist has inserted members of the Medici family into the scene. Both images © Getty Images.

Patterns of wealth and labor changed. People began to earn more money and buy more goods. As a result, demand for trade increased. Italian merchants grew wealthy from trade. Italian cities emerged as strong trade cities. Powerful banking families had great control over local politics. The Medici family, in Florence, is one example.

Wealthy people supported the Renaissance artists. The wealthy paid for elaborate portraits. Some had their family painted in religious or historical scenes.

Trade between Europe, Asia, and Africa helped the Renaissance. Trade brought new dyes from Central and South Asia. This helped create new paints for Renaissance painters. Bankers used math developed by Arabic and Indian scholars. Technologies were also shared. Paper, for example, was invented in China. This later helped develop the printing press in Europe.

Renaissance sultans

Another narrative is that Renaissance art and architecture was inspired by ancient Greek and Roman culture. But the Renaissance had a large influence from the east. In 1453, the Ottomans of Turkey took Constantinople. They secured power over the east. The Ottomans also supported the arts. The sultan hired Italian artists to work in his court.

Muslim scholars preserved Greek and Roman texts. Renaissance poets and writers were inspired by Islamic poetry. Italian architecture was also modeled on eastern cities. Some of these cities were Aleppo, Cairo, and Tabriz.



St. Mark Preaching in Alexandria, by Gentile and Giovanni Bellini. © Getty Images.

The painting above shows Saint Mark. He is a Christian figure. In the painting, he is preaching in Alexandria, Egypt to a crowd of Muslim men. However, Islam was not founded until nearly 600 years after Saint Mark's death. This is one example of how the Italian Renaissance was influenced by its exchange with Islamic culture.

Legacies of the Renaissance

Trade inspired some Europeans to explore Africa's western coast. European merchants bought silks and spices from the Ottomans. Italian merchants sent Portuguese sailors to West Africa. They went to Africa to find gold. These voyages also introduced Europe to West African art.



The King's Fountain, a painting by an anonymous sixteenth-century Dutch painter, depicting the waterfront in Lisbon's Alfama District. © The Berardo Collection, Lisbon, Portugal.

The painting above shows the waterfront of the Portuguese capital of Lisbon. Many of these people are enslaved Black people, but the painting also features several free Black people. It shows Black and white people dancing together. In the middle-right, a Black knight rides a horse. This painting and others show that European cities featured racial, ethnic, and religious diversity.

The Renaissance developed at the same time as systems of enslavement. Portuguese ships returned from West Africa with enslaved Africans. By the mid-1500s, slavery was common in parts of Europe, including Italy. The same economy that funded so much art eventually created the modern slave trade.

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Image credits

Cover image: The Ambassadors. Jean de Dinteville, French Ambassador to the court of Henry VIII of England, and Georges de Selve, Bishop of Lavaur. The painting is famous for containing, in the foreground, at the bottom, a spectacular anamorphic, which, from an oblique point of view, is revealed to be a human skull. An Azerbaijani vishapagorg rug is on the table. By Hans Holbein the Younger. © VCG Wilson/Corbis via Getty Images.

The School of Athens, by Raphael adorns one of the walls in the Vatican's Apostolic Palace. The painting features Greek philosophers including Plato and Aristotle. © Ann Ronan Pictures/Print Collector/Getty Images.

Self-portrait at the Easel by Sofonisba Anguissola. © Ali Meyer/Corbis/VCG via Getty Images.

Adoration of the Magi, by Botticelli (left) and the East Wall of the Magi Chapel in the Palace of the Medici (right), painted by Benozzo Gozzoli. Both paintings depict a religious scene from the Christian Bible, but in each case, the artist has inserted members of the Medici family into the scene. Getty Images.

St. Mark Preaching in Alexandria, by Gentile and Giovanni Bellini. © Leemage/Corbis via Getty Images.

The King's Fountain, a painting by an anonymous sixteenth-century Dutch painter, depicting the waterfront in Lisbon's Alfama District. The Berardo Collection, Lisbon, Portugal. <https://berardocollection.com/?article=32&lang=en&page=1&sid=50002>

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