

The Renaissance in Northern Europe

Italian humanism inevitably spread across the Alps to the Holy Roman Empire, France, the Netherlands, England, and other parts of northern Europe. The means of dispersion included merchants who bought Italian books and paintings for sale in northern Europe; northern students who attended Italian schools; and northern artists, sculptors, writers, and musicians who traveled to Italy to soak up the new ideas and techniques. Leonardo da Vinci even moved from Italy to France and spent the last years of his life working for King Francis I. [He took the Mona Lisa with him and that's how it eventually ended up in the Louvre Museum in Paris]. The fact that Latin was the universal language of educated elites throughout Europe made the spread of humanism quite easy.

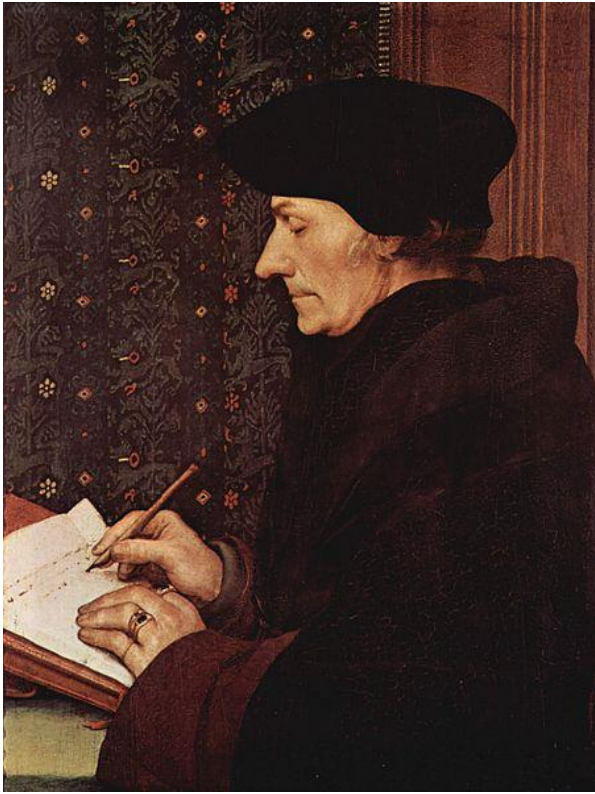
While the Italian Renaissance clearly inspired intellectuals in northern Europe, it wasn't all one-way traffic. Ideas and inventions flowed both ways. We have already seen that the two most famous Renaissance musicians associated with the introduction of polyphonic music, Guillaume Dufay and Josquin des Prez, were from the Netherlands. Also, northern artists were the first to experiment with oil-based paint. However, the most significant northern contribution to the Renaissance was Johann Gutenberg's invention of the printing press.

Christian Humanism

Just as Italian humanists rejected medieval scholasticism and revived classical studies, so too did northern humanists. They embraced the study of classical literature, history, philosophy, politics, and grammar. Yet, they differed from their Italian counterparts in one key area. Northern humanists were far more interested in critiquing Christianity. The goal of these "Christian humanists" was, by rediscovering the original teachings of Christianity, to expose the corruption and errors of the contemporary Church. Three important Christian humanists were Erasmus, Thomas More, and Johann Reuchlin.

Erasmus

Erasmus (1469-1536), an energetic Dutch intellectual, contributed more than any other person to the growth of Renaissance humanism in northern Europe. He was a very devout man and had spent seven years studying in a monastery. He was ordained a priest, though he never actually practiced as one. He traveled widely, especially in Italy. He studied incessantly, was an avid book collector, built an impressive personal library for himself, and became the most prolific writer in all of Europe. His goal was always to free Christianity from medieval theology and practices, as if he was peeling away the



layers of dirt and grease to reveal a bright, beautiful, shining object. Two of Erasmus's most famous works were *In Praise of Folly* and *Julius II Excluded*.

In Praise of Folly, published in 1509, attacked superstitious beliefs, gluttonous monks, greedy priests, cunning bishops, and, in the following excerpt, a public ignorant of true Christianity:

Or what should I say of them that hug themselves with their counterfeit pardons; that have measured purgatory by an hourglass, and can without the least mistake demonstrate its ages, years, months, days, hours, minutes, and seconds, as it were in a mathematical table? Or what of those who, having confidence in certain magical charms and short prayers invented by some pious imposter, either for his soul's health or profit's sake, promise to themselves everything: wealth, honor, pleasure, plenty, good health, long life, lively old age, and the next place to Christ in the other world, which yet they desire may not happen too soon, that is to say before the pleasures of this life have left them?

Julius II Excluded, published in 1514, used biting satire to expose the faults of Pope Julius II who had died the previous year. Erasmus imagines the scene at the gates of Heaven as Julius's entry is barred by Saint Peter. Pope Julius is furious that St. Peter is questioning his right to enter Heaven. Julius assumed that, as Pope, he would simply walk straight through the pearly gates! We pick up the conversation as Julius is beyond frustrated:

Julius: Enough of this. I am Julius II, P.M.

Peter: P.M! What is that? Pestis Maxima?

J: Pontifex Maximus, you rascal.

P: Is there no difference between being holy and being called Holy? Let me look a little closer at you. Ha! Signs of wickedness aplenty. Priest's cassock, but bloody armor beneath it; eyes savage, mouth insolent, forehead brazen, body scarred with sins all over, breath stinking with wine, health broken with debauchery. Ay, threaten as you will, I will tell you what you are.... You are Julius the Emperor come back from hell.

J: Shut up or I will excommunicate you.

P: Excommunicate me? By what right, I would know?

J: The best of rights. I am the Pope. Open, I say!

P: You must first show your merits.

J: What do you mean by merits?

P: Have you taught the true Christian doctrine?

J: Doctrine? Not I. I have been too busy fighting. I have monks to look after doctrine, if that is of any consequence.

P: Have you led by example? Have you been diligent in your prayers?

J: The invincible Julius should not have to answer to a beggarly fisherman. However, you shall know who I am. First, I am Italian, and not a Jew like you. My mother was a sister of the great Pope Sixtus IV. The Pope, my uncle, made me a rich man out of Church property and made me a cardinal. True, I had my misfortunes. I caught a disease from a prostitute. But I knew all along that I should one day be Pope. It came true, partly with French help, partly with money which I borrowed at interest, partly with promises. And I have done more for the Church and Christ than any Pope before me.

P: What did you do?

J: I raised a lot of revenue. I invented new offices and sold them. You should know that nothing can be done without money. I annexed the city of Bologna

to the Papal States. I tore up treaties, and led great armies into battle. I covered Rome with palaces, and left five million florins in the treasury behind me.

P: Why did you take Bologna?

J: I wanted it for my son.

P: What? Popes with wives and children?

J: Wives? No, not wives, but why not children?

P: Is there no way of removing a wicked Pope?

J: Absurd! Who can remove the highest authority of all? A Pope can be removed only by a general Church council, but no general council can be held without the Pope's consent. Thus he cannot be deposed for any crime whatsoever.

P: Not for murder?

J: No. Not even if he killed his own father.

P: Not for fornication?

J: Not even for incest.

P: Not for all these crimes gathered in a single person?

J: Add 600 more to them, there is no power that can depose the Pope.

P: A novel privilege for my successors, to be the wickedest of men, yet to be safe from punishment. So much the unhappier the Church that cannot shake such a monster off its shoulders. If Satan needed a vicar he could find none fitter than you. Have you ever acted like one of Christ's apostles?

J: Is it not apostolic to strengthen Christ's Church?

P: How have you strengthened the Church?

J: I filled Rome with palaces, troops of servants, armies ...

P: The Church had none of this when it was founded by Christ.

J: You are thinking of the early days when you starved as Pope, with a handful of poor hunted priests about you. Time has changed all that. Look now at our gorgeous churches, bishops like kings, cardinals gloriously attended, horses shod with gold and silver. Beyond all, myself, Supreme Pontiff, carried in a golden chair, and waving my hand majestically to adoring crowds. Hearken to the roar of the cannon, the bugle notes, the boom of the drums. Observe the military engines, the shouting populace, torches blazing in street and square, and the kings of the earth scarce admitted to kiss my Holiness's foot. Look at all this, and tell me, is it not magnificent? You are merely jealous because you realize what a miserable Pope you were compared to me.

P: You insolent wretch! Fraud, usury, and cunning made you Pope. I brought heathen Rome to acknowledge Christ; you have made it heathen again. With your treaties and your protocols, your armies and your victories, you had no time to read the Gospels. You pretend to be a Christian but you are no better than a Turk.

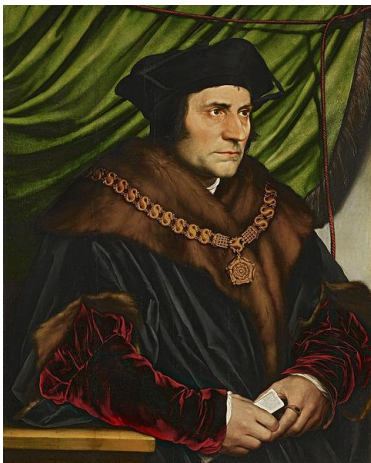
J: Then you won't open the gates?

P: Sooner to anyone else than to such as you.

J: If you don't let me in I will take this place by force. My soldiers are fighting enormous battles down on earth just now; I shall soon have 60,000 ghosts behind me.

P: Oh, you wretched man! I hear you are a great architect. Go build a fortress for yourself because the Devil is about to come for you.

Thomas More



The leading English humanist was Thomas More, best known for his book, *Utopia* published in 1516. More was a lawyer by profession but he was also an expert in classical studies. Everyone considered him to be the most educated man in England. King Henry VIII was so impressed with his wisdom, he appointed him Lord Chancellor in 1529 (more about that later!). More was a great friend of Erasmus, and the Dutch scholar frequently stayed with him when visiting England. Like Erasmus, More criticized the Church for being more

interested in wealth and power than with teaching people how to live moral lives. In reaction, More invented an imaginary island named Utopia in the Atlantic Ocean whose laws and customs are based on reason and where there is very little crime or exploitation. More coined the word Utopia from the Greek words for “good,” “not” and “place.” Therefore, a utopian society is an imagined perfect society that in reality doesn’t exist. More’s study of early Christian societies formed the basis for his Utopian society.

Johann Reuchlin

The German Christian humanist, Johann Reuchlin, was Europe’s leading authority on Judaism and the Hebrew language. He believed that since the Old Testament was written in Hebrew, and since Jesus Christ and the twelve apostles had been born Jewish, then Christian humanists should study the Jewish faith in order to fully understand the origins of Christianity. Reuchlin’s deep interest in Judaism, and his encouragement of other Christian humanists to study Hebrew texts, led to trouble. For centuries, the Catholic Church had hoped that the Jews would eventually accept the divinity of Jesus Christ and convert to Christianity. In the city of Cologne where Reuchlin lived, many clergy were outraged by his seeming embrace of Judaism. In 1509, using their authority to confiscate books that threatened the Christian faith, these clergy began confiscating Jewish books. Reuchlin, supported by most Christian humanists in the German states, strongly opposed this attack on Jewish scholarship. They appealed to the Holy Roman Emperor, Maximilian I, to order an end to the confiscations. It is interesting that most Christian humanists opposed the confiscations, not because they liked Jews, but because they believed humanists had the right to study all ancient texts. The so-called “Reuchlin Affair” dragged on until 1517 when another controversy, involving a German monk named Martin Luther, overshadowed it.

Art of the Northern Renaissance

Like Italian Renaissance art, the art of the Northern Renaissance used depth perception to capture three-dimensional reality on a two-dimensional canvas. It also paid great attention to the details of this life. Like their Italian peers, northern artists became well known and were not shy about celebrating their accomplishments. However, northern artists did not place as much emphasis on ancient Greek and Roman themes as did the Italian artists.

Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Peasant Wedding*



Pieter Bruegel was born in Flanders (modern day Belgium). He was nicknamed 'Peasant Bruegel' for his practice of dressing up like a peasant in order to mingle at weddings and other celebrations, thereby gaining inspiration and authentic details for his paintings. This particular wedding feast is in a barn; fixed to the wall, two bunches of wheat with a rake remind us of the work that harvesting involves, and the hard life of peasants. The plates are carried on a door off its hinges. The main food was bread, porridge and soup. The bride is in front of the green wall hanging. According to contemporary custom, the groom is not seated at the table but may be the man pouring the beer. Two pipers play music.

Current location: Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

Albrecht Dürer, *Self Portrait at Age 28 with Fur Coat*



In 1500, the German artist, printmaker, and mathematician, Albrecht Dürer, painted perhaps the most famous self-portrait of the Renaissance. Dürer was highly influenced by the Italian Renaissance, having made extended trips to Italy. To keep the focus entirely on himself, he painted the background black. The text on the right of the painting reads: 'I, Albrecht Durer from Nuremburg, painted myself with indelible colors at the age of 28 years.' To the left are Dürer's initials AD and the date of the painting: 1500. AD also stood for Anno Domini (Year of Our Lord)! Had he not signed the painting, the viewer might be forgiven for assuming that this was a painting of Jesus Christ. Would any medieval artist have dared to produce such a self-portrait?

Current location: Alte Pinakothek, Munich

Jan Van Eyck, *The Arnolfini Portrait*



Jan van Eyck was born in Flanders (modern day Belgium). This is a portrait of the Italian merchant Giovanni Arnolfini and his wife. Arnolfini had settled in the town of Bruges in Flanders. Painted in 1434, it is one of the oldest oil paintings in existence. In the candelabrum there is one candle lighting signifying the presence of God. In the mirror behind the couple's joined hands we see the reflection of van Eyck himself. The writing on the wall above the mirror translates as: *Jan van Eyck was present, 1434*. The dog symbolizes loyalty and fidelity. The ripe fruit on the sideboard represent fertility. Current location: National Gallery, London.



Details from the Arnolfini Portrait clearly show that, like Italian Renaissance artists, Van Eyck embraced naturalism.

