

The Northern Renaissance

A Comparison to the Italian Renaissance

We'll be exploring the Northern Renaissance, or quite simply, the Renaissance outside Italy in countries like England, Germany, France, and Spain.

VOCABULARY

- **Renaissance** - a period beginning in the late 14th century when people began taking an interest in the learning of earlier times, specifically the cultures of Greece and Rome. As the French word 'renaissance' implies, it was a rebirth in the appreciation of classical times.
- **city-state** - an independent state consisting of a city and its surrounding territory. Unlike, say New Jersey, which answers to a higher federal law, a city-state stands as its own authority.
- **cultural diffusion** - the spreading out of ideas from one central point to others.
- **classics** or **antiquities** - ancient Greece or Rome.
- **patron** - a patron of the arts, is a person who gives financial support to a person, cause, or activity.
- **Humanism** - the belief that man has beauty, worth, and dignity; life should be based around reason and humanity, not Church regulations and power.

The Renaissance Spreads North

Italy was the birthplace of the Renaissance, where ruins of ancient Rome stood in almost every city. This link to the cultural past made Italy the perfect place for the Renaissance to begin. Starting in the late 1400s, the Renaissance started spreading to countries like England, France, Germany, and Spain. When Northern merchants, diplomats, and soldiers began visiting the city-states of Italy, they were dazzled by the beauty of Italian art, architecture, and culture. Many returned home, carrying their love of the Renaissance over the Alps to their homelands. In short, the Northern Renaissance was born through cultural diffusion.

With this cultural diffusion, came changes to the Renaissance. Although the visitors of Italy wanted to emulate its culture, this proved difficult because their cultures were very different from Italy's. First, the Northern countries lacked inspiration from the cultures of Greece and Rome. Second, the Northern countries had powerful monarchs who ruled over their countries. And third, the Northern cultures were not as willing to give up their ties to the Catholic Church.

List the three reasons for the differences between the Northern and Italian Renaissance.

The North Lacks Classical Culture

Let's take a look at the cultural differences between the Italian and Northern Renaissances in terms of classical culture. Countries north of the Alps lacked the resources of the Italian Renaissance. In Italy, the evidence of classical antiquity was everywhere, affording great inspiration to their artists, architects, and sculptors. However, this link between the present and the past was much weaker in the rest of Europe. For instance, an architect in Germany couldn't simply walk out his door to study the ancient architecture of the Colosseum, nor could a sculptor living in England gaze upon the statues of Trevi Fountain. Also, unlike Italy, the rest of Europe was rural, not urban, affording little opportunity for the spread of new ideas.

Instead of focusing on the statuesque bodies of Greek sculptor, the artists of the North drew from THEIR everyday lives and surroundings. While Italian artists were using frescoes, or paintings done with pigment on wet plaster, to highlight mythology and the antiquities, Northern artists were practicing their craft using oil paints to perfect straight lines, exquisite detail, and realistic landscapes. A great example of this is the work of Van Eyck, one of the first major artists of the Northern Renaissance. Take a look at his painting, *The Annunciation*. Notice the clean lines of the cathedral walls; they look like they were drawn with a ruler. Also, notice the exquisite detail of the women's attire, the floor, and even the seat cushion! This is an excellent example of the North's propensity toward detail in the entire composition.

Compare this to the Italian Renaissance painting, *The Tribute Money* by Masaccio. Apart from the human subjects of the painting, this work gives little thought to detail. This is a very classic characteristic of Italian Renaissance art, where the human form was of utmost importance. Notice how the mountains, field, and ground are roughly represented, almost as if they were an afterthought. Both are beautiful pieces of art, but they differ greatly.

Another example of this quest for accuracy comes from Albrecht Durer, a German artist who is considered one of the greatest artists of the Northern Renaissance. Take a look at his painting, *Young Hare*. Again, Durer's realistic flair makes it look like the rabbit is real, poised to jump off the page at any moment. This is a classic example of how the Northern Renaissance focused on creating pieces that realistically illustrated the natural world.

Compare/Contrast Italian Renaissance with Northern Renaissance. Add to this list as you read!

ITALIAN

Similarities

NORTHERN



LEFT *The Annunciation* by Van Eyck
BELOW *Young Hare* by Albrecht Durer



The Tribute Money by Masaccio

Selected works by Pieter Brueghel the Elder

(also see textbook page 481)



ABOVE – Children's Games

BELOW – The Hay Harvest



Monarchs Influence the Renaissance

Another difference in the Northern Renaissance comes in the way of politics. During this time period, the political structure of Northern Europe differed greatly from that of Italy. Unlike Italy, which was a collection of independent city-states, the Northern areas of England, France, and Spain were being formed into *nations under powerful kings and queens*. Germany, like Italy, was divided into several large states, but it was unified by the Holy Roman Empire. Like the princes and rulers of the Italian city-states, the monarchs of Northern Europe supported the Northern Renaissance but they did it on their own terms.

One such monarch was France's King Francis I, who ruled during the mid 16th century. He was a great patron of the arts, however he held the Italian artists in higher esteem than the work of his own subjects. Wanting to be like the cultured princes of Italy, he surrounded himself with some of the most famous artists of the Italian Renaissance, even inviting DaVinci to travel to France. This appetite for Italian art was also seen in England, where the Tudor Dynasty ruled. Henry VII, the first Tudor monarch, mirrored the footsteps of France by welcoming Italian philosophers and scholars to England.

How did the monarch spread the Italian Renaissance throughout Northern Europe?

Why do you think they looked down upon the work of their own subjects?

Strong Ties to the Catholic Church

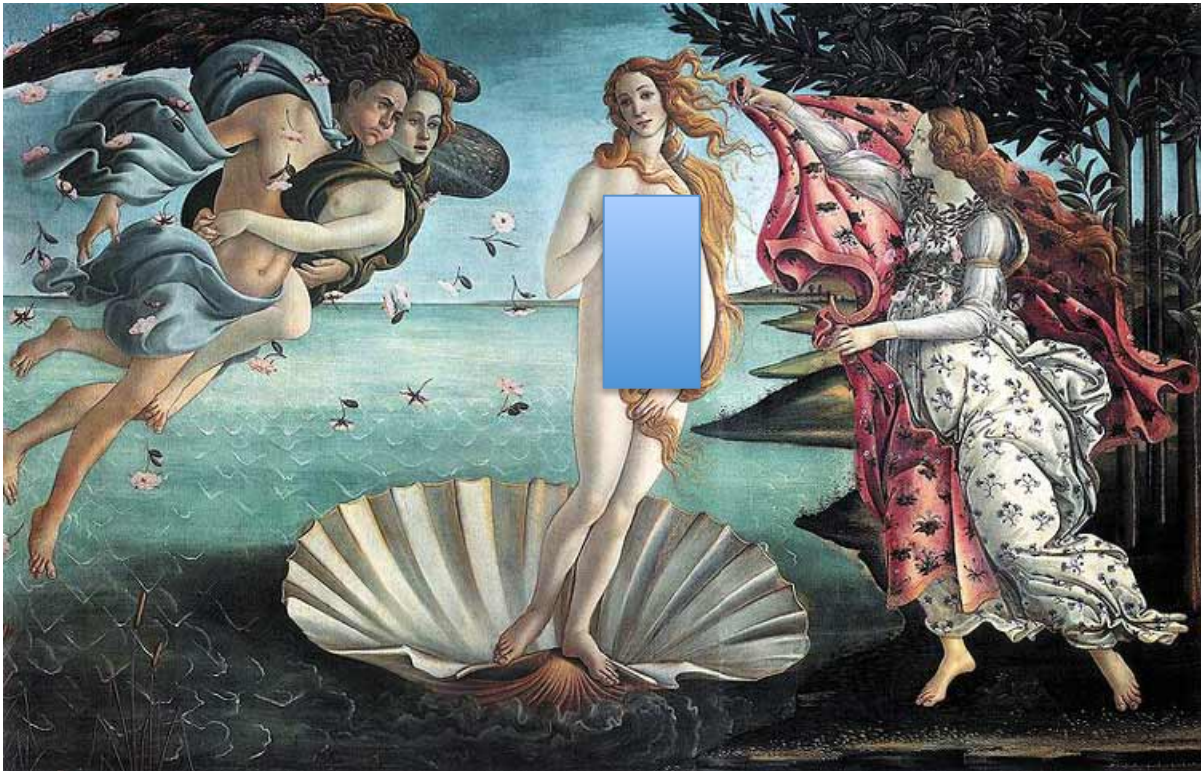
Perhaps the greatest difference between the Italian Renaissance and the rest of the Renaissance throughout Europe was in the Northern Renaissance's *close ties to the Catholic church*. This gave birth to Christian humanism, or a mixing of the knowledge of the antiquities with the moral teachings of Jesus Christ. Unlike the humanism of Italy, which focused solely on writers like Virgil and Cicero, Northern Renaissance scholars brought back the older works of the church, including the texts of the Bible, Saint Augustine, and Saint Jerome. This Christian influence is plainly seen in the art of the Northern Renaissance. Unlike the more provocative works of Italy, Northern artist focused more on religious themes and undertones. With **Flanders** rather than Florence being the center of the Northern Renaissance, art was much more restrained, some might say, almost proper. Compare the racy work of Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus* with Van Eyck's Northern Renaissance *Madonna and Chancellor Rollin*.

The Northern Renaissance's close ties to the church were also seen in the birth of Christian Humanism. Erasmus, the most famous of Christian humanists, was born in the Netherlands, educated in Paris, and well traveled throughout Europe. Trained in both Latin and Greek, he respected the works of men like Socrates but believed it was man's relationship to Christ that really counted. In his work, *The Praise of Folly*, he used humor to criticize Church leaders for their fixation on church rituals rather than Christ-like values. Erasmus' ideas and works became so popular in the North that kings and princes from all over Europe competed for his services at their courts.

Another influential Christian Humanist was Thomas More. Born in England, Moore devoted his life to the principles that inspired Erasmus. He too believed that the works of the classics had value when viewed through the lens of Christian texts. More defended studying classical Greek and Roman culture, believing they could lead to a better understanding of the supernatural. Also, he reminded his opponents that the Bible itself was written in the languages of the antiquities.

In his work, *Utopia*, More created an ideal society where everyone is concerned with health and happiness rather than wealth and power. This work highlights the Christian themes of charity and goodness, while also including the classic ideas of independence. Although More would eventually lose his head (literally) for opposing King Henry VIII, he, and his fellow Christian Humanist, successfully mixed the study of the classics with church texts, giving the world a new way to understand Christianity. This focus on the church and its PURE teachings, gave the Northern Renaissance its own distinct flavor and flare.

In what ways did the Northern Renaissance preserve Christian thinking?



ABOVE: *The Birth of Venus* by Botticelli

BELOW: *Madonna and Chancellor Rollin* by Van Eyck

