

Name _____

Date _____



The Renaissance

Imagine you're living in Italy in the year 1350. The bubonic plague, which has killed more than half of your country's population, is finally on its way out. And in the midst of this death and devastation, you start to see a sliver of hope.

The word "renaissance" is French for "rebirth," and that's what the Renaissance was: kind of a comeback for Europe after a plague devastated the continent in the mid-1300s. Italy, one of the most urban societies in Europe at the time, was hit especially hard. But for the people who survived, new economic and social opportunities awaited.

Previously, in the Middle Ages, the dominance of the Catholic Church and the feudal system had made many Italians believe the world order was fixed. Peasants would always be peasants, nobles would always be nobles, and that destiny was ordained by God. But now, land was cheap, and there were more resources to go around, so social classes became more flexible. Extremely wealthy families, like the Medici in Florence, gained political power and were able to financially support artists. And in the mid-1400s, Johannes Gutenberg popularized the printing press in Europe, making it easier to spread ideas through books and pamphlets.

The Renaissance was marked by an intellectual movement called humanism. Historians argue there are many ways to interpret humanism, but most agree that it was a renewed interest in classical Greek and Roman culture, which had largely been ignored during the Middle Ages. Studying this ancient philosophy, literature, and art encouraged people to adopt a more worldly outlook that focused more on human ability and experiences than blind religious faith. This doesn't mean humanist thinkers were not religious. Petrarch, the Italian scholar who is considered the "father of humanism," believed that God gave humans their creativity and intelligence, and each person should use those gifts to live up to their potential.

Humanism is apparent in many works of Renaissance art. Take Michelangelo Buonarroti's "David" statue in Florence. Most artists showed David, the Biblical hero, triumphing after defeating the giant Goliath. But

Michelangelo sculpted David as he imagined him before the confrontation, right in the moment of making the decision to fight. He showed David as a thinking, rational human instead of a religious icon. He also gave David a very lifelike appearance, sculpting realistic muscles, veins, tendons, and even wrinkles out of marble.

Leonardo da Vinci is probably the best-known example of a “Renaissance man,” an expression for someone who is interested and talented in many different areas. He was an extraordinary painter who created “The Last Supper” and the “Mona Lisa.” But he also considered himself a scientist—studying human anatomy, astronomy, and fossils—as well as an architect, mathematician, and inventor. His drawings, which were mostly unpublished when he died, contain the prototypes for inventions that wouldn’t be built for centuries: cars, solar heat collectors, and robots!

This intellectual and artistic movement soon spread north from Italy to the rest of Western Europe. The Renaissance also influenced the Scientific Revolution, a period when new discoveries in biology, chemistry, physics, and astronomy transformed society’s understanding of the world around us. Polish astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus had the idea that the Earth revolved around the sun—a truly controversial belief at the time. Inspired by Copernicus, Italian scientist Galileo Galilei invented the telescope. Francis Bacon developed the scientific method of investigation, which scientists still use today.

Copernicus’s theory that the Earth revolved around the sun was groundbreaking at the time. What do you think scientists might have believed about the solar system before his idea?

The Renaissance was an excellent time for the arts and sciences—but not so much for the Catholic Church. The rise of humanism and scientific discovery created a lot of questions that challenged the Church’s authority. A German monk, Martin Luther, believed the Church was corrupt and led a push for reform, resulting in the Reformation and the rise of Protestantism.

Let’s review. The Renaissance was a period of prolific growth in the arts, literature, philosophy, and science in Europe in the 14- and 1500s. It was inspired by classical Greek and Roman culture and marked by a deep curiosity about the human experience.

Where do you see the legacy of the Renaissance today?

