



## Capturing the Renaissance

**H**alf a millennium after first lighting up Europe's cultural landscape, the Renaissance still evokes the springtime of Modernity, when medieval fears and follies were discarded for new hope. The cultural rebirth started on the Italian peninsula, where the rediscovery of forgotten Latin letters led to a renewed interest in the Classical study of humanity and its place in the natural world. Its disciples called themselves humanists, and soon they spread their message over the Alps. Never quite forgetting the medieval imperatives of salvation and God's plan, they still shifted the goals of human knowledge, rejecting superstition and custom for new literature, new science, new societies and, finally, the New World itself. After germinating for nearly a century, the Renaissance then burst forth in its full glory around 1500, with the inventions of Leonardo da Vinci, the artistry of Michelangelo and Dürer, the scholarship of Erasmus and the discoveries of Columbus, Vesalius and Copernicus.

Such, at least, is the Renaissance usually taught in schools. Like the humans who made it, however, Europe's time of rebirth also had its dark side. Just a year after Sandro Botticelli painted his *Birth of Venus*, a German priest named Heinrich Kramer published the first comprehensive manual for witch-hunting. Witchcraft and sorcery were actually quite real to many educated Europeans, as were such pseudo-sciences as astrology and alchemy. Pogroms, the Inquisition and millenarian religious movements all flourished more vigorously than they had during the Middle Ages. Few spoke out against such excesses of faith, and fewer still protested as, from the 1490s on, the Universal Church imploded, states slid into dynastic or religious war and their soldiers spread carnage and syphilis among civilians. Europeans who

ventured abroad mixed fascination with new climates with imperial ambitions and leftover (but fondly held) notions of holy war – a divine mission to subdue, convert and often enslave those native peoples they encountered.

The failure of Renaissance men and women to apply Classical learning to the troubles of their own day says something about the lessons available from the ancient Greeks and Romans – and about the conflicted knot of ideals, beliefs and sentiment present in European minds. In their writings (if not in their art), they seem less intellectually self-confident than their medieval ancestors or their Enlightenment descendants, but the humanist discourse spreading out from Italy was more method than answers. They offered a state of mind with which to approach the world, not an orthodoxy to provide all the answers.

Those who embraced humanism made of it what they wanted, or what they could. The range with which they experienced the Renaissance was vast, and the aim of this volume is to present that range, through the life and works of ninety-four individuals – men and women, saints and sinners, scholars and artists. Many are familiar names today: the centuries between 1400 and 1600 were embarrassingly rich with truly epochal personalities, and it would be unthinkable to leave out Michelangelo, Columbus, Luther or Copernicus. Yet there are many lesser lights in here as well: those who lived and laboured in comparative obscurity and who also, in their way, personified this reawakening, moved it forward or somehow fell foul of it.

We explore these lives in seven sections, avoiding the approach of surveys that group their subjects by nationality. Instead, each section ties the era's intellectual currents to its dominant political and social concerns, since for us the Renaissance was not a state or a people, but a people's state of mind. We begin with fifty years (1400–1450) that set the stage, featuring ten (mostly Italian) individuals whose remarkable interests and Europe-wide mobility helped establish and spread the new humanism.

Then follows the Renaissance proper – a century of discovery and tumult running from 1450 to 1550. This core of our study breaks down naturally into five sections, each revolving around a grand theme and each marking a stage in Europe's evolving rebirth. Since the cultural shifts we are exploring

did not reach all parts of Europe at the same time, there is some overlap between the sections, even as they plot out a continuous narrative thread. Our Renaissance begins abruptly with the remarkable 1450s, witnessing in the space of just three years the fall of Constantinople (1453), the end of the Hundred Years' War (1453), the Peace of Lodi in Italy (1454) and Gutenberg's 42-line Bible (1455). Whatever the long-term impact of these important events, the immediate result was comparative peace and prosperity in much of Europe. We detail these years in two sections, outlining first the possibilities of self-realization (1450–75) and then the national consolidation (1470–95) that such an era made possible.

In time, such peace and prosperity spawned ambitious over-reaching that led, almost inexorably, to the end of both. Our fourth section examines fifteen lives from the ensuing years (1490–1515) of shifts and discontinuities, as princes sought to extend their dynastic reach in Europe, threw vast sums into military modernization and set out on imperialist adventures. Weakened by contention and economic upheaval, the shared Renaissance values of the late 15th century eventually broke down altogether. In our next section (1510–35) we present sixteen Europeans forced to cope with, among other uncertainties, the spreading collapse of the Universal Church and the rise of Spanish power. Only gradually were new norms established from the wreckage of the old social and political ones. We close our presentation of the Renaissance proper with a section devoted to men and women who flourished from 1530 to 1550, during the emergence of princely and Protestant cultures that their grandparents could never have imagined. We then conclude with a valedictory section: fourteen lives from the years 1550–1600. These were the Europeans who had to come to grips with the early-modern world, those for whom the optimism and excesses of the Renaissance were fading in the backward-glancing mirror of history.



## I. Old Traditions and New Ideas

1400–1450

The year 1400, when this story begins, was not an especially promising one for Europeans. The bubonic plague, after its devastating arrival in 1348–50, had returned every generation thereafter, driving the population into an exceptionally long demographic trough that bottomed out with a devastating outbreak in 1400–1. The Holy Roman Empire, at the heart of the continent, was split with a particularly bitter leadership crisis in 1400, with one emperor deposed, another murdered, a third deserted by his army and much of Germany falling into banditry and chaos. Europe's two leading monarchies were equally crippled. In 1399 the English king, Richard II, had been removed in a coup d'état whose repercussions echoed for nearly a century, while the part of France unoccupied by English troops was ruled by a thoroughly insane monarch known, appropriately, as Charles the Mad. Finally, the papacy, potentially the continent's moral compass, was hopelessly split between rival claimants in Rome and Avignon – one of them illiterate and the other abandoned by most of the cardinals who had elected him – in what a later historian called 'one of the saddest chapters in the history of the Church'. Believing that this papal decline presaged or even invited God's imminent retribution, in 1399 penitent laymen began wandering from city to city in Catalonia, Provence and Italy, flagellating themselves, gathering in great throngs and predicting the collapse of society.

The decay of such venerable institutions as the Holy Roman Empire and the papacy was not permanent, of course, and, despite being quintessential medieval creations, they eventually found the road to modernization and rejuvenation, as did the still feudal monarchies of England and France. Europe

also emerged, albeit slowly, from its demographic slump, and even during the population crisis of the early 15th century some economic advantages emerged from the wreckage. Although there were far fewer Europeans in 1400 than in 1300, the available wealth in some ways remained constant, meaning that individual survivors were demonstrably wealthier, with more and better farmland to feed the cities, which were no longer so crowded and fetid. The artisans who came seeking work, being fewer in number and more in demand, found significantly higher wages, along with cheaper housing. As long as they could avoid the plague, the upper classes too did better for themselves, with undiminished patrimonies going to a reduced number of heirs. The increasingly complex finances of these elites gave rise to more nimble and efficient systems of banking and trade, while their desire to stand out from their peers and enjoy whatever life they were given created an explosive demand for luxury crafts, palaces and works of art.

This demographic and economic confluence especially benefited Europe's two most urbanized centres – the Low Countries and northern Italy. The wealthy textile and trading cities of Flanders and the Netherlands, under the benign if not always enlightened rule of Philip the Bold, entered an era of particular prosperity, expressed through building, land reclamation and the innovative work of such artists as Jan van Eyck. The essentially autonomous towns of northern Italy, linked only tenuously to a negligent Holy Roman Empire, also enjoyed a period of growing wealth, and if most of these free communes had by 1400 found themselves usurped by local lords, a few oligarchic republics still maintained some of the trappings and much of the intellectual ferment of populist rule.

In much of northern Italy this ferment expressed itself in the rediscovery of the peninsula's Classical heritage. Uniquely among major European societies, the Italians could confidently embrace their own past – the Roman Republic and Empire – as a culturally superior era. Extensive, if often enigmatic, ruins had existed for centuries, but by the late 14th century the writings of Latin masters were increasingly being copied and disseminated. As educated Italians uncovered these remnants of their national legacy, many experienced a quasi-religious enthusiasm, dreaming up family trees

that reached back to Aeneas or seeking to identify every public building in Republican Rome. This passion for Classical roots had a way of spilling out beyond the preserve of scholars, however, as wealthy merchants asked their architects to design palaces based on the teachings of Vitruvius, military commanders studied the experiences of Caesar and Pompey, and Republican apologists applied Cicero's notions of public service to their own programmes of education and government.

From the late 14th century on, Italians made great use of their Classical past, but their enthusiasm for purging Latin of neologisms, discovering original texts and applying what they found to their own cities, buildings and families could easily have remained a localized, parochial movement. Europeans beyond the Alps, especially those whose past connections with Imperial Rome had been hostile, tenuous or forgotten, had little reason to rush to embrace the study of Latin letters. The Church, which might have provided a conduit to take Latin studies beyond the Alps, was too firmly set against the great majority of Roman pagan authors.

In the years just before 1400, however, the Italians broadened their Classical studies, as the Florentines invited Manuel Chrysoloras to come from Constantinople to teach them Greek. Cicero and other Romans had convinced Italians of the debt that they owed their Greek predecessors, but it was not certain that Italians would take the step of mastering Greek themselves: the language was both difficult and largely forgotten, and the culture more alien than those past influences would make it seem. That they did so was not just to their own intellectual credit. By embracing Greek, Italian scholars and antiquarian enthusiasts shifted their studies from their own, Latin past to create the notion of a larger world of the Classics, one that encompassed the entire ancient world rather than just their Roman ancestors. Between 1400 and 1450, as they mastered Greek and secured its key texts, Italians also launched a genuine, European Renaissance, one proposing the rebirth of a Classical past broad enough to become a movement across the continent.



## Manuel Chrysoloras

A GREEK BEARING GIFTS

c. 1350–1415

One of the most charismatic figures of the early Italian Renaissance was not Italian at all but Greek. Born into an ancient family of Constantinople, Manuel Chrysoloras mastered the Greek Classics while still a youth. A bright light of the Byzantine court and personal friend of Emperor Manuel II Palaeologus, Chrysoloras was a natural choice as Byzantium's ambassador to the West. In 1390–91 he went looking for allies to help defend his fading homeland against Turkish encroachment and, although he never managed to elicit any meaningful military or financial support, he did uncover a tremendous, unfulfilled thirst among Italians for Classical Greek letters.

Although rediscovery of the Classics – the great enterprise that made up the core of the Italian Renaissance – was already well under way by the late 14th century, scholars remained handicapped by their inability to read Greek, the knowledge of which had all but died out in the West by the year 1100. The Classical Greek and Hellenist canon – Homer, Plato, the Athenian dramatists, the lyric poets, the satirists and the great scientists – was consequently lost to scholars, who suffered all the more since their favourite Latin authors often proclaimed their literary debt to their Greek forebears. Those wishing to experience this ultimate source of Western culture could only make do with bad translations out of Arabic or struggle over Greek originals on their own. Petrarch owned a copy of Homer, which he found tantalizingly inaccessible, while Boccaccio had a go at translating the *Iliad*, but the results were neither literary nor especially accurate.

In 1391 Chrysoloras was in Venice, where he met the Florentine Roberto Rossi, who wrote enthusiastically of the Byzantine's broad knowledge of Classical Greek letters to the chancellor of Florence, Coluccio Salutati. Mustering support from some of the wealthiest and most cultured Florentines, Salutati sent an emissary off to Chrysoloras, who had already returned to Constantinople, offering him a professorship at the University of Florence and giving him a long shopping list of Greek works, both to use as teaching tools and to lay the foundation of a Greek library in Florence. Chrysoloras took his time negotiating over his salary and did not arrive until 1397, but once he took up his post he readily grasped that his primary duty was to make ancient Greek literature available to Italian students. Training pupils to read and comprehend a dead language was, at this time, a novel undertaking. Chrysoloras saw that turning Classical Greek into Latin – the common language of Florence's literate elite – was something of an art form, requiring his students to master the spirit of the ancients as well as their literal words, to produce texts that were all faithful to the original while still elegantly translated.

During his stay in Italy, Chrysoloras gave hundreds of aspiring Classicists their first exposure to the Greek letters. An inner circle of his best students remained excited and united for the rest of their lives by the knowledge, as Leonardo Bruni put it, that they were the first Italians in over 700 years to have mastered Classical Greek. Inspired by their master, they produced innumerable translations that made Florence the centre of 15th-century humanism and placed it at the very heart of the Renaissance.

Chrysoloras himself remained just three years in Florence, and then, in typical academic fashion, he was poached by Florence's great rival, the duke of Milan, to teach at the University of Pavia. Before long, however, Chrysoloras was again on the move, visiting universities in Bologna and Padua. Eventually his masters back in Constantinople drafted him away from teaching and assigned him to diplomatic missions. He travelled to Paris, Rome and Germany, seeking (though rarely finding) funds and support for the failing Byzantine Empire. Chrysoloras's ecumenical inclinations also allied him with the papacy in its attempt to reconcile the Greek and Latin

Churches. It was while on his way to the Council of Constance, as the Greek Orthodox Church's representative, that he died suddenly in 1415.

During the century that followed, other Greeks, some more able scholars than Chrysoloras, came to Italy. None stirred up quite the excitement that he had, however, either in the few years of his active teaching or in the decades after his death. Although he was not a prolific writer, his translations into Latin of Homer and of Plato's *Republic* immediately became seminal works in the Greek Classics, used by Italians as models for their own efforts. Years after his death, in 1484, his *Erotemata* ('Questions'), arguably the first Greek grammar, was published in Venice and won pre-eminence among scholars of both Classical literature and the New Testament.



## Christine de Pizan

DEFENDER OF WOMEN

c. 1364–c. 1430

‘And I who was formerly a woman, am now in fact a man,’ wrote Christine de Pizan in *The Book of Fortune's Transformations*. The line could come from a modern newspaper headline, but is actually from a 15th-century allegory, an autobiographical tale of a woman forced by tragedy into a man's role. Plunged into near destitution by her husband's early death, Christine rejected the usual choices for a respectable widow: entering a convent or taking another husband. Instead, she took a masculine path towards a literary career, wielding her pen and intellect to earn a living. She made history for three reasons: she was the first professional female writer in Europe, one of the earliest French humanists and a proto-feminist who levelled unprecedented attacks on misogynistic thinking that had pervaded Western culture for centuries.

Christine was born in Venice around 1364 and moved to Paris four years later, after her father was named physician to the French king, Charles V. Like nearly all girls at the time, she was denied a formal education. Although her relatively progressive father encouraged her ‘inclination to learning’, her mother kept her ‘busy with spinning and silly girlishness’, and Christine had to settle for the academic ‘crumbs I gathered from my father's table’. At the age of 15 she was married to a handsome young scholar whom she grew to love deeply, and she was devastated by his unexpected death in 1389. Money difficulties compounded her grief, and the 25-year-old Christine found herself near bankruptcy. She spent years in litigation, sitting in cold courtrooms, clutching her bag and papers while enduring ‘stupid looks

from some fat drunkard[s]’ as she tried to collect from his estate. Creditors repossessed the family’s valuables, and the bereft widow now had to provide for herself as well as her three children, mother and niece. ‘When I saw the flood of tribulations rushing upon me,’ she recalled later, ‘I wanted to die rather than to live.’

As an older woman, however, Christine would describe this wrenching period as pivotal and declare that her ‘duties common to married women and also frequent child-bearing’ had precluded a life of the mind. It was her husband’s death that freed her to write. At first she penned pain-filled poems about his passing, but she eventually turned to fashionable lyric verse, and before long she was earning both respect and income from wealthy patrons, a Renaissance artist’s main source of support. Aspiring to more serious work, however, she launched an ambitious self-education programme: ‘I closed my doors, that is, my senses, so that they would no longer wander around external things,’ and focused on Latin, history, the sciences and literature – both Classical and contemporary.

Armed with both freedom and knowledge, she wrote prolifically; by 1405 she had produced fifteen long works and an impressive pile of short ones. What took her beyond the courtly social scene and into the ranks of the learned elite, however, was the controversy over the famous medieval allegory *The Romance of the Rose*, a chronicle of a man’s quest to pluck an unopened bud (or, less coyly, to bed a maiden). France’s literati had debated its artistic merit for years, but Christine was the first to denounce its misogyny, taking the unheard-of stance that it heaped unfair denigration on women. Drawing on her own life for material, she decried girls’ exclusion from classrooms and condemned the social neglect of widows. Men throughout history had derided ‘the fairer sex’ as feeble-minded sex objects and scheming adulteresses, and she tartly marvelled at how women could possibly embody both. In *The Book of the City of Ladies* she imagined a fortress to protect women and hypothesized reasons for men’s ill-will: her most pointed suggestion was that sour old men with impotent bodies disparage women to ‘spoil for others the pleasure that they themselves cannot enjoy’.

Christine wrote deftly on other topics as well. Commissioned to pen a biography of Charles V shortly after his death, she used a personal, detailed approach – a style admired in Italy but new to France – that became standard during the Renaissance. Both civil strife and the Hundred Years’ War with England rocked France during this period, and Christine responded with patriotic verse honouring fallen soldiers and, remarkably, a military treatise that would later be read by such men as England’s Henry VII and one of Napoleon’s generals. In her last known work she lauded Joan of Arc, who in 1429 led a series of successful assaults against the English that returned a French monarch to the throne. Just weeks after the battle Christine wrote, ‘The realm [has been] elevated and restored by a woman – something a hundred thousand men could not have done ... Oh, what an honour to the female sex!’

When Christine died, she had written an astonishing thirty books. Many early copies survive today, suggesting her works were widely read and often reissued in her lifetime. Allusions to and translations of her writing continued to be published long after her death, and 16th-century records show that powerful European women – Elizabeth I, for one – owned tapestries of scenes from *City of Ladies*, a text that frequently appears in today’s university curricula. Indeed, much of Christine’s work is still in print today, for any woman who, like her, has ‘abandoned all feminine tasks’ and ‘devoted her mind to study’.