

Renaissance Italy (1417 to 1572)

Renaissance Art and Literature

The term 'Renaissance' refers to the 14th through 16th centuries, especially the period immediately preceding the Protestant Reformation. Renaissance means "new birth" and is used to emphasize the great advances in art, architecture, music, and literature associated with the period. It is mostly associated with Italy where a great deal of the artistic innovation of the age originated, but it refers also to a period of time when education, science and literature were flourishing throughout Europe.

It is ironic that the many of the city-states of Italy, which led the way in many the fine arts, suffered much political turmoil during the same period they produced many of the greatest masterpieces of the age. While the sovereigns of other regions of Europe, such as France, Spain and England, consolidated power Italy remained divided between dozens of independent city-states. In Italy, the Renaissance refers to an age of civil war, mercenary armies, political treachery, assassination and anarchy. In spite of all the turmoil, leaders of several of the wealthier city-states (including many popes) generously supported an extraordinarily talented array of artists, sculptures, writers, and musicians with their dominions. Much of the art and literature of the era was religiously inspired, but some was quite irreligious. The Renaissance era is therefore known for its decadence as well as its glorious achievements.

The contributions of many of the great the artists and writers of the Renaissance period are of such importance they are covered in detail in the Arts, Architecture, Music, and Literature divisions of the Catholic Culture program. Only a few of the most important artists closely associated with Rome and the Vatican are listed below.

- **Bramante** (1444-1514) — Greatest architect of the High Renaissance. Original architect of St. Peter's Basilica.
- **Botticelli** (1445-1510) — Leader of the Florentine School. Works include 'Trials of Moses' and 'Temptation of Christ' for the Sistine Chapel.
- **Michelangelo** (1475-1564) — Greatest artist of the High Renaissance. Famous sculptures include 'Pieta' and 'David'. Paintings include Ceiling of Sistine Chapel and Last Judgement. Also worked on design of St. Peter's Basilica.
- **Raphael** (1483-1520) — Prolific painter best known for the Raphael Rooms in the Vatican, including 'Vision of the Cross', 'Meeting of Leo the Great and Attila', 'Disputation of the Holy Sacrament' and 'School of Athens'.
- **Palestrina** (1525-1594) — Leading composer residing in Rome during Reformation era. Renowned for reverent and dignified polyphonic compositions.
- **Bernini** (1598-1680) — Sculptor and Architect who worked on St. Peter's Basilica. Designed Baldacchino altar canopy in St. Peters

Politics of Renaissance Italy

The map at right shows the major city states and duchies of Italy during the 15th century. The Political situation during the Renaissance era is difficult to understand. As the map shows, Italy was divided into many independent political units with complicated histories and diverse forms of government.



The most powerful states in Renaissance Italy were Venice, Genoa, and Florence, all of which became rich from trade during the Crusading era. Each of these cities had complicated financial interests and employed mercenary soldiers, known as *Condottiere*, to protect their wealth. Venice and Florence, along with Rome were also the three cities most associated Renaissance art. The great wealth and cosmopolitan character of the trading cities of Italy explain how art and literature could thrive in Italy during periods of war and conflict.

The various regions of Italy had different forms of government, but in most cases the power was held by a few wealthy families. The powerful families of Italy made alliances with each other or with other powerful sovereigns and fought among themselves. For most of the Middle Ages and Renaissance era, these same families controlled the Papacy. Most Popes of the time were scions of leading Italian families such as de Medici, Borgia, Della Rovere, Colona, Conti, Orsini, Sforza, and Farnese. The Renaissance was an age of rampant "nepotism", and popes were expected to name nephews and other

family members as Cardinals as soon as they were of age.

In order to complicate things even further Medieval Italy suffered from centuries of civil war. In some cases city-states against each other, but in other cases there was conflict between political factions within a city. The disruptions that plagued Italy during the 12th and 13th centuries were known as the **Guelf-Ghibelline Wars** and were fought between independent city states and those allied with the Holy Roman Emperor. Once the Western Schism was resolved, however, the long-running conflict morphed into the **Italian Wars**, a series of conflicts between cities allied with either Spain or France. These endless wars greatly weakened both the Emperor and the Pope and made it extremely difficult for them to counter the Protestant Revolt when it occurred.

Renaissance Popes

The chaotic political environment of Italy should be kept in mind when evaluating the Renaissance popes. Most popes of the era were scions of leading Italian families and their involvement in political conflicts was unavoidable. Bribery, nepotism, treachery, and assassination were common occurrences and a number of popes died under suspicious circumstances. Most Italians expected their popes to uphold the teaching of the Church Fathers, administrate competently, and protect the political interests of the Papal States, but did not expect Church leaders to behave as saints. Low expectations regarding the personal piety of Renaissance era popes is shown by the fact that only two popes who during the 13th through 16th centuries were canonized. One was Celestine V (1294), who resigned under force and was

murdered by Boniface VIII. The other was Pius V (1566-72), who implemented the reforms of Trent and organized the Holy League to fight the Turks.

The following list includes a dozen of the most important Renaissance popes with their families [or Religious Order], and some of their major achievements. Until the Reformation period, the 'major achievements' of most Renaissance Pope involved advancing the interests of the Papal States or patronizing art, rather than for implementing reforms of the universal Church.

- **Martin V** (Colona) — Elected pope at the Council of Constance to bring an end to the Western Schism
- **Nicholas V** [Dominican Order] — Created the Vatican Library
- **Callixtus III** (Borgia) — First Spanish Pope. Called a crusade against the Ottoman Turks.
- **Sixtus IV** (Della Rovere) — Built Sistine Chapel, Vatican archives, Authorized Spanish Inquisition
- **Alexander VI** (Borgia) — Increased influence of Spain, had mistresses and children, cause of scandal
- **Julius II** (Della Rovere) — St. Peter's Basilica, "Warrior" pope, led troops into battle
- **Leo X** (Medici) — Granted "indulgences", sponsored Raphael, Michelangelo
- **Clement VII** (Medici) — Difficult papacy, Sack of Rome, Ex-communicated Henry VIII
- **Paul III** (Farnese) — Convened Council of Trent. Commissioned Michelangelo for St. Peter's Basilica
- **Pius IV** (Medici) — Presided over Council of Trent
- **St. Pius V** [Dominican Order] — Reformer, Promulgated TLM, Excommunicated Elizabeth, Battle of Lepanto

The Vatican and the Renaissance

The "Vatican" as we know it today was largely the work of the Renaissance Popes.

For the first fifteen centuries of Christendom, the "Vatican" referred to "Mons Vaticanus" a hill located across the Tiber river from the center of Rome said to be the burial site of St. Peter after his martyrdom during the reign of Nero. In about 320 A.D. Emperor Constantine undertook to build a church on the site of St. Peter's tomb. This church stood for over 1000 years, and was a major pilgrimage destination in Rome. The "Old St. Peter's Basilica" was used for Papal coronations, and sometimes imperial coronations.

From 313 until 1307 the Lateran Palace in Rome was the official Papal residence, but it was destroyed by fire during the Avignon Papacy, and could not be rebuilt. When the Papacy returned from Avignon another Basilica in Rome (Santa Maria Maggiore) became the Pope's residence but by the 15th century, the decision to move the Papacy and Curia to the Vatican was made.

Many of the famous buildings in the Vatican were built during the 15th and 16th centuries, including the Sistine Chapel and the Basilica of St. Peter. This was during the High Renaissance, and the Popes of the era were renowned for their generous patronage of art and music. Some of the famous buildings built or renovated during the Renaissance period (in addition to the Basilica and Sistine Chapel), include the Vatican Library, Vatican Museum, and Vatican Palace.