

# Session 1: Documents

- Please read the documents in this PowerPoint in preparation for the first session. (Unlike your college days, there are no penalties for failing to do all your reading—except perhaps some limits to understanding as all of the documents will be referred to in the lecture).
- Be sure to read the definition of Renaissance (the first slide) as it is the foundation or “thesis” of the course. A chart following gives an overview of the five major city-states then existing and comments on the level of Renaissance activity in each.
- The excerpts from Vasari, Michelet, Burckhardt, and Burke relate to the historiography of the Renaissance. Ghiberti is a primary source relating to Vasari’s comments.
- On some documents, brackets in the margins indicate particularly relevant passages.
- In the event you find the print too small, remember that on a PowerPoint you can enlarge using the symbols at the bottom of the slide.

A French word meaning “rebirth,” Renaissance refers to a period of intellectual, cultural, and artistic flowering that occurred in Italy between about 1350 and 1530, reaching its zenith in Florence in the 1460s to mid-1490s. The “rebirth” (*Rinascimento* in Italian) referred to the revival of classical Greco-Roman culture and values, but it occurred with a decidedly Christian tone. The major values of humanism and individualism, derived from Greek and Roman literature, art, and philosophy, epitomized Italian Renaissance culture and world-view. Other values marking this period were secularism (more emphasis on this world than the afterlife), materialism (accumulation of wealth and goods), civic humanism (devotion to one’s city-state), naturalism (the appreciation of nature and the desire to reproduce it realistically), and “virtù” (the requirement that one develop all of one’s talents to the fullest).

## City-state Florence

## Venice

## Milan

## Rome

## Naples

	City-state Florence	Venice	Milan	Rome	Naples
POLITICAL	oligarchic republic (rich citizens)	oligarchic republic (rich citizens)	hereditary duchy (military coup by condottiere Sforza)	Papal rule	hereditary monarchy (monarch Spanish)
	representative legislature-- signoria	representative legislature various councils	no representation	no representation	no representation
	no named executive (de'Medici family rules from behind the scenes)	Doge--elected	despotism (dictatorship)	despotism with supportive power of religion	arbitrary rule
ECONOMIC BASE	trade, banking production of wool	long-distance trade; shipping; boat building; production of glass	arms/armor production and trade	church finance and agriculture	agriculture (form of manorial org.)
LEVEL OF URBAN-IZATION	very high a number of subject cities in the area	very high a number of subject cities in the area	medium a few important urban centers	limited few large urban centers in area	very limited Naples the only large urban center on mainland

The Renaissance flourished earliest, from native roots, and reached its fullest expression in Florence and Venice. It was later and more dependent on outside influences (and individuals) in Milan and Rome. It was least fully experienced in Naples.

it be believed that this came from anything else but the absence of better architects in that age, seeing that the said church (as it has been possible to see in our own day), which is octagonal and constructed from the spoils of the Theatre, the Colosseum and other edifices that had been standing in Arezzo before it was converted to the faith of Christ, was built without thought of economy and at the greatest cost, and adorned with columns of granite, of porphyry, and of many-coloured marbles, which had belonged to the said buildings. And for myself I do not doubt, from the expense which was clearly bestowed on that church, that if the Aretines had had better architects they would have built something marvellous ; for it may be seen from what they did that they spared nothing if only they might make that work as rich and as well designed as they possibly could, and since, as has been already said so many times, architecture had lost less of its perfection than the other arts, there was to be seen therein some little of the good. At this time, likewise, was enlarged the Church of S. Maria in Grado, in honour of the said Hilarian, for the reason that he had been for a long time living in it when he went, with Donatus, to the crown of martyrdom.

But because Fortune, when she has brought men to the height of her wheel, is wont, either in jest or in repentance, to throw them down again, it came about after these things that there rose up in various parts of the world all the barbarous peoples against Rome ; whence there ensued after no long time not only the humiliation of so great an Empire but the ruin of the whole, and above all of Rome herself, and with her were likewise utterly ruined the most excellent craftsmen, sculptors, painters, and architects, leaving the arts and their own selves buried and submerged among the miserable massacres and ruins of that most famous city. And the first to fall into decay were painting and sculpture, as being arts that served more for pleasure than for use, while the other—namely, architecture—as being necessary and useful for bodily weal, continued to exist, but no longer in its perfection and excellence. And if it had not been that the sculptures and pictures presented, to the eyes of those who were born from day to day, those who had been thereby honoured to the end that they might have eternal life, there would soon

have been lost the memory of both ; whereas some of them survived in the images and in the inscriptions placed in private houses, as well as in public buildings, namely, in the amphitheatres, the theatres, the baths, the aqueducts, the temples, the obelisks, the colossi, the pyramids, the arches, the reservoirs, the public treasuries, and finally, in the very tombs, whereof a great part was destroyed by a barbarous and savage race who had nothing in them of man but the shape and the name. These, among others, were the Visigoths, who, having created Alaric their King, assailed Italy and Rome and sacked the city twice without respect for anything whatsoever. The same, too, did the Vandals, having come from Africa with Genseric, their King, who, not content with his booty and prey and all the cruelties that he wrought there, carried away her people into slavery, to their exceeding great misery, and among them Eudoxia, once the wife of the Emperor Valentinian, who had been slaughtered no long time before by his own soldiers. For these, having fallen away in very great measure from the ancient Roman valour, for the reason that all the best had gone a long time before to Byzantium with the Emperor Constantine, had no longer any good customs or ways of life. Nay more, there had been lost at one and the same time all true men and every sort of virtue, and laws, habits, names, and tongues had been changed ; and all these things together and each by itself had caused every lovely mind and lofty intellect to become most brutish and most base.

But what brought infinite harm and damage on the said professions, even more than all the aforesaid causes, was the burning zeal of the new Christian religion, which, after a long and bloody combat, with its wealth of miracles and with the sincerity of its works, had finally cast down and swept away the old faith of the heathens, and, devoting itself most ardently with all diligence to driving out and extirpating root and branch every least occasion whence error could arise, not only defaced or threw to the ground all the marvellous statues, sculptures, pictures, mosaics, and ornaments of the false gods of the heathens, but even the memorials and the honours of numberless men of mark, to whom, for their excellent merits, the noble spirit of the ancients had set up statues and other

memorials in public places. Nay more, it not only destroyed, in order to build the churches for the Christian use, the most honoured temples of the idols, but in order to ennoble and adorn S. Pietro (to say nothing of the ornaments which had been there from the beginning) it also robbed of its stone columns the Mausoleum of Hadrian, now called the Castello di S. Angelo, and many other buildings that to-day we see in ruins. And although the Christian religion did not do this by reason of hatred that it bore to the arts, but only in order to humiliate and cast down the gods of the heathens, it was none the less true that from this most ardent zeal there came so great ruin on these honoured professions that their very form was wholly lost. And as if aught were wanting to this grievous misfortune, there arose against Rome the wrath of Totila, who, besides razing her walls and destroying with fire and sword all her most wonderful and noble buildings, burnt the whole city from end to end, and, having robbed her of every living body, left her a prey to flames and fire, so that there was not found in her in eighteen successive days a single living soul; and he cast down and destroyed so completely the marvellous statues, pictures, mosaics, and works in stucco, that there was lost, I do not say only their majesty, but their very form and essence. Wherefore, it being the lower rooms chiefly of the palaces and other buildings that were wrought with stucco, with painting, and with statuary, there was buried by the ruins from above all that good work that has been discovered in our own day, and those who came after, judging the whole to be in ruins, planted vines thereon, in a manner that, since the said lower rooms remained under the ground, the moderns have called them grottoes, and "grotesque" the pictures that are therein seen at the present day.

After the end of the Ostrogoths, who were destroyed by Narses, men were living among the ruins of Rome in some fashion, poorly indeed, when there came, after 100 years, Constantine II, Emperor of Constantinople, who, although received lovingly by the Romans, laid waste, robbed, and carried away all that had remained, more by chance than by the good will of those who had destroyed her, in the miserable city of Rome. It is true, indeed, that he was not able to enjoy this booty, because,

being carried by a sea-tempest to Sicily and being justly slain by his own men, he left his spoils, his kingdom, and his life a prey to Fortune. But she, not yet content with the woes of Rome, to the end that the things stolen might never return, brought thither for the ruin of the island a host of Saracens, who carried off both the wealth of the Sicilians and the spoils of Rome to Alexandria, to the very great shame and loss of Italy and of Christendom. And so all that the Pontiffs had not destroyed (and above all S. Gregory, who is said to have decreed banishment against all the remainder of the statues and of the spoils of the buildings) came finally, at the hands of that most rascally Greek, to an evil end; in a manner that, there being no trace or sign to be found of anything that was in any way good, the men who came after, although rude and boorish, and in particular in their pictures and sculptures, yet, incited by nature and refined by the air, set themselves to work, not according to the rules of the aforesaid arts, which they did not know, but according to the quality of their own intelligence.

and that which leads into the convent; and in S. Spirito in the said city, the whole side of the cloister opposite the church; and in like manner at Arezzo, in S. Giuliano and S. Bartolommeo and in other churches; and in Rome, in the old Church of S. Pietro, scenes right round between the windows—works that have more of the monstrous in their lineaments than of likeness to whatsoever they represent. Of sculptures, likewise, they made an infinity, as may still be seen in low-relief over the door of S. Michele in the Piazza Padella of Florence, and in Ognissanti; and tombs and adornments in many places for the doors of churches, wherein they have certain figures for corbels to support the roof, so rude and vile, so misshapen, and of such a grossness of manner, that it appears impossible that worse could be imagined.

Thus far have I thought fit to discourse from the beginning of sculpture and of painting, and peradventure at greater length than was necessary in this place, which I have done, indeed, not so much carried away by my affection for art as urged by the common benefit and advantage of our craftsmen. For having seen in what way she, from a small beginning, climbed to the greatest height, and how from a state so noble she fell into utter ruin, and that, in consequence, the nature of this art is similar to that of the others, which, like human bodies, have their birth, their growth, their growing old, and their death; they will now be able to recognize more easily the progress of her second birth and of that very perfection whereto she has risen again in our times. And I hope, moreover, that if ever (which God forbid) it should happen at any time, through the negligence of men, or through the malice of time, or, finally, through the decree of Heaven, which appears to be unwilling that the things of this earth should exist for long in one form, that she falls again into the same chaos of ruin; that these my labours, whatsoever they may be worth (if indeed they may be worthy of a happier fortune), both through what has been already said and through what remains to say, may be able to keep her alive or at least to encourage the most exalted minds to provide them with better assistance; so much so that, what with my good will and the works of these masters, she may

abound in those aids and adornments wherein, if I may freely speak the truth, she has been wanting up to the present day.

But it is now time to come to the Life of Giovanni Cimabue, and even as he gave the first beginning to the new method of drawing and painting, so it is just and expedient that he should give it to the Lives, in which I will do my utmost to observe, the most that I can, the order of their manners rather than that of time. And in describing the forms and features of the craftsmen I will be brief, seeing that their portraits, which have been collected by me with no less cost and fatigue than diligence, will show better what sort of men the craftsmen themselves were in appearance than describing them could ever do; and if the portrait of any one of them should be wanting, that is not through my fault but by reason of its being nowhere found. And if the said portraits were not peradventure to appear to someone to be absolutely like to others that might be found, I wish it to be remembered that the portrait made of a man when he was eighteen or twenty years old will never be like to the portrait that may have been made fifteen or twenty years later. To this it must be added that portraits in drawing are never so like as are those in colours, not to mention that the engravers, who have no draughtsmanship, always rob the faces (being unable or not knowing how to make exactly those minutenesses that make them good and true to life) of that perfection which is rarely or never found in portraits cut in wood. In short, how great have been therein my labour, expense, and diligence, will be evident to those who, in reading, will see whence I have to the best of my ability unearthed them.

## Giotto Brings Art out of the Dark Ages

LORENZO Ghiberti

One of the greatest artists of the Florentine quattrocento, "a holy light of inspiration for many fellow citizens," as Vasari wrote, Lorenzo di Cione Ghiberti was born in Florence in 1378. After spending time in Rome, where he admired the works of Giotto and Cavallini, and then in some small northern Italian cities, Ghiberti returned to his birthplace. It was there that he defeated Jacopo della Quercia and Filippo Brunelleschi in the famous contest for the baptistery doors. In 1403 he started working on the first door, which he completed in 1424. In 1452, after twenty-seven years of work, he finished his renowned masterpiece, the so-called *Porta del Paradiso*, with the help of his son Vittorio. Among his numerous other pieces are the statue of St. Matthew for the Church of Orsanmichele, the tomb of St. Zenobius in the cathedral of Florence, and the bas-reliefs of the baptismal font in Siena. He died in Florence in 1455.

During the last years of his life, probably between 1447 and 1448, Ghiberti wrote the three books of his innovative *Commentari*. The first book, filled with citations and borrowings from Pliny and Vitruvius, focuses on ancient art; Book 2 discusses works of art from the late Middle Ages to the quattrocento. These first two chapters set the stage for Ghiberti to introduce a large section on his own artistic production, a sort of autobiography—the first, as far as we know, by an artist published in any language, ever. Book 3 is a sketch of auxiliary sciences, such as optics and anatomy, that the author considered prerequisites to artistic training; for this part of the *Commentary*, Ghiberti relies heavily on such medieval scholars such as Averroës, John Peckham, and Roger Bacon.

One can assert with confidence that by reorganizing the numerous notes he had collected over the course of some twenty years and by commenting on them in the terminology successfully introduced by Alberti in *De pictura* and *De statua*, Ghiberti composed the first survey of the history of art from antiquity to his own time. In so doing he revealed the cultural self-awareness and the typically humanistic sense of history that will characterize later Florentine surveys of art. We can see these features in the following passage from the beginning of Book 2, in which Ghiberti, by resorting to an expertise obviously much greater than that of the historian Filippo Villani, praises Giotto for reviving classical art, whose long period of decadence was marked by the Byzantine and the Carolingian styles.

Source: Lorenzo Ghiberti, *I Commentari*, ed. Ottavio Morisani (Naples: Ricciardi, 1947), pp. 32–34.

### SECOND COMMENTARY

At the time of the Emperor Constantine and Pope Sylvester, the Christian religion had grown. Idolatry was persecuted so violently that all statues and paintings were destroyed, their ancient and exquisite beauty ruined. Likewise, the volumes, commentaries, outlines, and rules that had instructed such an excellent and noble art were lost. Finally, in order to delete every possible form of idolatry, the Church proclaimed that all temples were to be white [inside and out]. At that time, terrible punishments were inflicted on those who dared produce any sort of statue or painting; this marked the end of the arts of sculpture and painting, and of any type of doctrine related to them.

After art was extinguished, temples remained white for about six hundred years. The Greeks<sup>1</sup> had devoted themselves to the art of painting with utterly unsatisfactory results, and so, too, the men of this age lacked in refinement and expertise. This was 382 olympiads<sup>2</sup> after the founding of Rome.

The art of painting started its reascent in Etruria. In a village called Vespignano, near the city of Florence, an extraordinary genius was born. One day, when the painter Cimabue happened to pass through the village on his way to Bologna, he saw a boy sitting on the ground bent over a flat rock, drawing a sheep. Cimabue was seized with admiration for the boy, since the latter was so young and yet capable of drawing so well. Seeing that the boy had talent, he asked him his name. The boy answered, "My name is Giotto; my father's name is Bondone and he lives in that house over there." Cimabue went with Giotto

to his father. Cimabue, a rather distinguished-looking man, asked the father to let the boy go with him. As the father was very poor, he gave Cimabue his boy, and Cimabue took Giotto with him to make him one of his pupils. Cimabue worked in the Greek style and obtained fame throughout Etruria. It was thus that Giotto became great in the art of painting.

Giotto championed this new art, abandoning the uncouth style of the recent painters, and became the most renowned artist in all Etruria. He produced excellent works, not only in Florence but throughout Italy as well. He had numerous pupils, all of whom he taught so well that they, too, became as good as the ancient Greeks. Giotto saw in art what others failed to grasp. He invented a natural style and grace without losing sight of proportion. He mastered all the arts, and he uncovered all those things which had been buried for nearly six hundred years. When Nature wants to bestow something, she lavishes it unstintingly. Giotto produced myriad, diverse works; he painted on walls, on canvas, on panels. At St. Peter's in Rome he made the mosaic with the boat and painted with his own hand the chapel and the altarpiece of St. Peter. In Naples, he brilliantly decorated King Robert's Hall of Famous Men and painted in the Castel dell'Ovo. He painted all the works in Padua's Arena Chapel. There is a *Worldly Glory* by his hand. At the headquarters of the Guelph party is his cycle of the Christian faith, and, at one time, there were many other works as well. In the church of the Friars Minor in Assisi, he painted most of the lower part. He also painted in Assisi's Santa Maria degli Angeli. In Santa Maria della Minerva in Rome, one can see two of his works: a crucifix and a panel.

In Florence, Giotto painted numerous works. In the Badia, on an arch over the main entrance, he painted a wonderful half-length Our Lady flanked by two figures. Here, he also painted the main chapel and its altarpiece. At the Friars Minor, he painted four chapels and four panels. He did excellent paintings for Padua's Friars Minor. One can still see his pieces in the Humiliate Friars in Florence—the chapel he painted is no longer there, but there are still a large crucifix and four panels: one which depicts the death of Our Lady with the angels, the twelve apostles, and our Lord around her; it is an extremely well-executed piece. There is a very large panel with Our Lady on a chair surrounded by angels. Over the door leading to the cloister is a half-length Our Lady holding the infant Jesus in her arms. In San Giorgio one can see a panel and a crucifix by him [Giotto]. At the Friars Preachers there are a crucifix and a sublime panel, along with many other things. He painted for many lords. He

painted in the Palazzo del Podestà in Florence, where he depicted the city being robbed, and painted the chapel of St. Mary Magdalene.

Giotto deserves the greatest praise. He mastered all the arts, even the art of sculpture. The first figures on the building he erected, the bell tower of Santa Reparata, were all carved by his own hand to his own design. I once saw the marvelous preparatory sketches of these figures, which he himself had done. He was an expert in drawing as well as sculpting. Having inspired the diffusion of so much knowledge, he deserves the greatest praise. It is clear that nature endowed him with all the talent possible, thanks to which he managed to cultivate perfection in the arts. He had many pupils who later attained great fame.

1. By "Greeks" Ghiberti is referring here not to ancient Greek artists, but rather to the Byzantines.
2. On Ghiberti's puzzling method of dating by olympiads, see Krautheimer (1956), mentioned in the "Lorenzo Ghiberti" section of our bibliography.

## HISTORY OF FRANCE

BY

J. MICHELET

Ten years of studies given in the *Middle Ages*, ten years in the *Revolution*, it remains for us, to link this great whole, to place between these two histories that of the *Renaissance* and the modern age. This volume is the *Renaissance* proper, the next one, which will appear, will be called the *Reformation*.

Meaning and scope of the Renaissance.

The amiable word Renaissance reminds friends of the beautiful only of the advent of a new art and the free development of fantasy. For the scholar, it is the renovation of the studies of antiquity; for the jurists, the day which begins to shine on the discordant chaos of our old customs.

Is that all? Through the fumes of a battling theology, the *Orlando*, the arabesques of Raphaël, the undines of Jean Goujon, amuse the whim of the world. Three very different minds, the artist, the priest and the skeptic, would readily agree that such is the final result of this great century. The *what do I know?* de Montaigne is all that saw Pascal; and Bossuet, with this in mind, wrote his *Variations*.

Thus this colossal effort of a revolution, so complex, so vast, so laborious, would have given birth to nothing. Such an immense will would have remained without result. What could be more discouraging for human thought?

These over-informed minds have only forgotten two things, small indeed, which belong to this age more than all its predecessors: the discovery of the world, the discovery of man.

The XVI<sup>th</sup> century, in his great and legitimate extension goes from Columbus to Copernicus, Copernicus to Galileo, the discovery of the earth to the sky.

The man found himself there. While Vesale and Servet revealed his life to him, through Luther and Calvin, through Dumoulin and Cujas, through Rabelais, Montaigne, Shakespeare, Cervantes, he penetrated his moral mystery. He probed the deep bases of his nature. He began to sit in Righteousness and Reason. Doubters have helped the faith, and most daring of all could write at the portico of his *Temple of the Will*: "Enter, let us found deep faith here."

Profound, in fact, is the basis on which the new faith rests, when rediscovered antiquity recognizes itself as identical in heart to the modern age, when the East glimpsed reaches out its hand to our West, and when, in the place, in time begins the happy reconciliation of the members of the human family.

§ II

## Translation of excerpt from Michelet on PowerPoint

“An immense event had taken place. The world was changed. Not a European state, even the most immobile, was not launched in a whole new movement [...].

Rare and singular phenomenon! France backward in everything (except one point, the material of war), France was less advanced in the arts of peace than in the fourteenth century. Italy, on the contrary, deeply matured by its very sufferings, its factions, its revolutions, was already in the middle of the sixteenth century, even beyond, by its prophets (Vinci and Michelangelo). This barbarism thoughtlessly strikes one morning against this high civilization; it is the clash of two worlds, but much more, of two ages that seemed so far apart; shock and spark; and from that spark, the pillar of fire called the Renaissance. ”

Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*

In the Middle Ages both sides of human consciousness—that which was turned within as that which was turned without—lay dreaming or half awake beneath a common veil. The veil was woven of faith, illusion, and childish prepossession, through which the world and history were seen clad in strange hues. Man was conscious of himself only as a member of a race, people, party, family, or corporation—only through some general category. In Italy this veil first melted into air; an objective treatment and consideration of the state and of all the things of this world became possible. The subjective side at the same time asserted itself with corresponding emphasis; man became a spiritual individual, and recognised himself as such. In the same way the Greek had once distinguished himself from the barbarian, and the Arabian had felt himself an individual at a time when other Asiatics knew themselves only as members of a race....

In far earlier times we can here and there detect a development of free personality which in Northern Europe either did not occur at all, or could not display itself in the same manner. But at the close of the thirteenth century Italy began to swarm with individuality; the charm laid upon human personality was dissolved; and a thousand figures meet us each in its own special shape and dress. Dante's great poem would have been impossible in any other country of Europe, if only for the reason that they all still lay under the spell of race. For Italy the august poet, through the wealth of individuality which he set forth, was the most national herald of his time. But this unfolding of the treasures of human nature in literature and art—this many-sided representation and criticism will be discussed in separate chapters; here we have to deal only with the psychological fact itself. This fact appears in the most decisive and unmistakable form. The Italians of the fourteenth century knew little of false modesty or of hypocrisy in any shape; not one of them was afraid of singularity, of being arid seeming unlike his neighbours.

# The Myth of the Renaissance

*Peter Burke*

Jacob Burckhardt defined the period in terms of two concepts, 'individualism' and 'modernity'. In the Middle Ages, according to Burckhardt, 'human consciousness ... lay dreaming or half awake beneath a common veil Man was conscious of himself only as a member of a race, people, party, family, or corporation--only through some general category.' In Renaissance Italy, however, 'this veil first melted into air man became a spiritual *individual*, and recognised himself as such'. Renaissance meant modernity. The Italian was, Burckhardt wrote, 'the first-born among the sons of modern Europe'. The fourteenth-century poet Petrarch was 'one of the first truly modern men'. The great renewal of art and ideas began in Italy, and at a later stage the new attitudes and the new artistic forms spread to the rest of Europe.

This idea of the Renaissance is a myth. . . .

Burckhardt's mistake was to accept the scholars and artists of the period at their own valuation, to take this story of rebirth at its face value and to elaborate it into a book. To the old formulae of the restoration of the arts and the revival of classical antiquity, he added new ones such as individualism, realism, and modernity....

This nineteenth-century myth of the Renaissance is still taken seriously by many people. Television companies and organisers of package tours still make money out of it. However, professional historians have become dissatisfied with this version of the Renaissance, even if they continue to find the period and the movement attractive. The point is that the grand edifice erected by 'Burckhardt and his contemporaries has not stood the test of time. More exactly, it has been undermined by the researches of the medievalists in particular. Their arguments depend on innumerable points of detail, but they are of two main kinds.

In the first place, there are arguments to the effect that so-called 'Renaissance men' were really rather medieval. They were more traditional in their behaviour, assumptions and ideals than we tend to think-and also more traditional than they saw themselves. Hindsight suggests that even Petrarch, 'one of the first truly modern men', according to Burckhardt, had many attitudes in common with the centuries he described as 'dark'....

In the second place, the medievalists have accumulated arguments to the effect that the Renaissance was not such a singular event as Burckhardt and his contemporaries once thought and that the term should really be used in the plural. There were various 'renascences' in the Middle Ages, notably in the twelfth century and in the age of Charlemagne. In both cases there was a combination of literary and artistic achievements with a revival of interest in classical learning, and in both cases contemporaries described their age as one of restoration, rebirth or 'renovation'.