

Values of the Renaissance

When Swiss historian Jakob Burckhardt wrote his seminal work *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* in the 1860s, he broke new historical ground by defining a period by its *Zeitgeist* (roughly translated, spirit of the times), not by its political events and institutions. *Zeitgeist* focused on capturing what people believed and valued that set them apart from earlier peoples and ages. Despite the criticism that some of Burckhardt's ideas have generated,¹ his notion of defining this period by its beliefs and values continues to have great validity. Below are listed and briefly defined the major values and ideals of the Italian Renaissance.

Humanism. This is the most characteristic value of the Renaissance. It is a complex notion pulling together three interlocking elements: a belief in man as a proper focus of study (in literature, art, philosophy, politics, etc.); a revival of the classical learning of the Greeks and Romans (for whom man was the only and logical focus of study); and the concrete work on reviving and correcting classical texts and language and creating new works in the style of the classics. This contrasts greatly with the Medieval era when G-d was the only proper focus of study – thus the emphasis on theology and canon (church) law in the universities and the ignoring of (and in some cases the actual destruction of) works by Greco-Roman (pagan, non-Christian) writers. During the Renaissance, Plato moved to the center of study (which occurred outside the universities); Cicero, Livy, Virgil and others became the models for oration and style. The centrality of Humanism does not mean that this was a totally secular, irreligious or atheistic age; in fact, it means the opposite. Renaissance thinkers believed man to be a proper focus of study precisely because G-d had created him in His image and had endowed him with a “spark of the divine”: the ability to create (intellectually and artistically).

Individualism. In the Middle Ages, identity was “corporate,” that is, it was defined by the group to which one belonged. To be an “individual” was frightening and to be avoided for fear of being made an outcast in a heavily conformist society. During the Renaissance, individual expression and thought, separating oneself from the crowd in terms of ideas and creations were highly prized.

Secularism. In contrast to the medieval world when the goal and focus of life were the attainment of salvation in the next life, Renaissance man was firmly planted in this world and strove to enjoy the things that this world had to offer. They saw that this world could be made comfortable and satisfying and that a sense of contentment and well-being did not have to be delayed until the after-life. Again, this does not mean the Renaissance was anti-religious or even areligious; the men of the Renaissance were devout Christian believers.

Materialism. During the Middle Ages the Church had preached against the accumulation of goods and wealth (although it amassed major fortunes) as indicative of

¹ Especially criticized has been Burckhardt's notion that the Renaissance appeared suddenly and swiftly, and almost out of nowhere, in Italy. The analogy he uses is of a veil being lifted from the eyes of the people enabling them suddenly to see their individuality.

the sin of pride and of the corruption of the spirit. “It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle, than for a wealthy man to enter the gates of heaven,” the Church quoted from scripture. Anything unnecessary for sustenance or salvation was considered a “vanity,” useless, in fact, detrimental to attaining salvation. The Renaissance instead, going along with secularism, saw no reason why material comforts and beauty on this earth could throw up obstacles to heaven. If man-made artistic creations – be they paintings, sculpture, houses, furniture, clothing, jewelry – were the results of the G-d’s gift to man of creativity and genius, how could they be bad?

Civic Humanism. Just as the classical Greek city-states had their *philotimea*, so too did Renaissance man have his love for his city-state. Whether it was ruled as an oligarchic republic or a tyranny, the city-state fostered the values, the profit, the security and the well-being of the citizen and the citizen owed her much. To be involved in politics, to give freely of one’s talents for the city-state’s greater good and prosperity, to sacrifice in time of need, and to boast of the city-state’s beauty and accomplishments – all these were expected of the citizen.

Appreciation of Nature/Naturalism. The medieval world was a very nasty place where people were largely at the whim of nature – wild animals, weather, natural disasters made life uncertain at best. The medieval response to this was to see Nature as an enemy, something to be overcome. By the time of the Renaissance, the re-growth of central authority, order, trade, and transportation had “tamed” Nature to a certain extent; at least, it had become much less frightening to the men of the Renaissance. For the first time in the European world men set out purposely to enjoy and observe natural surroundings: flowers, trees, mountains, seas. And from their study and observation they moved to accurate and natural depiction of their objects of study – the human form, the environment, the cityscape, the flora and fauna. An off-shoot of this was a value called *varietas*. It was obvious that G-d had created in Nature innumerable varieties of types, shapes, colors, textures of things. If this was true of the G-d-created universe, why should it not also be true of man-made world of art, architecture, fashion, and the like.

Virtù. Virtù is an Italian word coming from the Latin root *vir* (man). A direct translation is “manliness,” but this should not prompt images of machismo and body-building. During the Renaissance, having virtù meant that one developed all of his skills and talents to the fullest. It was not enough to be a successful businessman, one had also to be able to read and write in more than passable Latin as well as Italian (and if one knew Greek, even better); one had to be familiar with philosophy, history, and rhetoric; one had to dress well and have a respectable house; one had to have good aesthetic sense and know quality; one had to have manners and gallantry; one had to know how to ride a horse, use a sword, fight in the militia. In modern terms, one had to be a “Renaissance Man.” Less commonly used to describe this was the phrase “l’uomo universale” (universal man).²

² A note about “gender neutral” language.....it is not used here because it would be wrong. The Renaissance was a males-only (or at least males-predominately) phenomenon.