

THE ITALIAN RENAISSANCE

By
MARIA J. FALCO, PhD

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I'm sure everyone in this room has both heard of the Italian Renaissance and knows quite a bit about it as well. After all, who has not heard of Leonardo da Vinci (you'd have to be brain dead, right?), and Michelangelo Buonarrotti, and Raffaello Sanzio? How about Cosimo dei Medici and his grandson Lorenzo "The Magnificent", and Niccolo Machiavelli, and Cesare Borgia, Federigo da Montefeltro, Giangaleazzo Visconti, and Ludovico "il Moro", all in the political arena? Ok, now other no less distinguished and important artists and architects like Donatello, Brunelleschi, Massaccio, Verrocchio, Fra Angelico, Botticelli, Titian, Tintoretto, Bellini, Bramante, Alberti, Ghiberti, Merlozzo da Forlì, and Andrea Palladio? I'm sure you are familiar with the works of many of them. How about the following literary figures: Petrarca, Boccaccio, Coluccio Salutati, Leonardo Bruni, Pico della Mirandola, Marsiglio Ficino, Lorenzo Valla, Aldus Manutius, Pietro Bembo, Baldassare Castiglione, Torquato Tasso, Francesco Guicciardini? Have I lost you yet? The following are Popes: Nicholas V, Sixtus IV, Alexander VI, Julius II, Leo X, Clement VII. What about these women: Lucrezia Borgia, Caterina Sforza, Isabella and Elizabetta d'Este, Artemesia Gentileschi and Marietta Tintoretto? If you can correctly identify each of the individuals I have just named, I'll sit down now and let you finish eating. Shall I go on? I could throw in Christopher Columbus, but that would be too obvious.

What do these names mean to us today? Just pretty pictures and statues, or poetry, or a political fling or two? Well, some people think they represent the greatest flowering of culture, intellectual achievement, artistic, literary and scientific genius since the fall of the Roman Empire, (hence “Renaissance” or “rebirth”—a French word, applied by a Swiss historian to an Italian phenomenon), but more importantly, some might argue, with the possible exception of Ancient Athens, ever in the history of civilized human kind. However, it was more than just a rebirth of classical philosophical ideas and art, it was the merging of those ideas and practices into a totally new entity: Humanism, both Christian and Civic (community oriented, not individualism).

Excessive, you say? How about these concepts: the dignity of man, free will, equal worth of all individuals, equality under the law; citizenship, participation in and responsibility for the life and well-being of the community; political and economic freedom, virtue, self governance, and republicanism. Surely these were not new ideas. But the freedom to put them into practice unhindered by external forces and the right to pursue one’s own vision of one’s destiny—to create one’s own destiny, how about that? (Sound familiar? “The pursuit of happiness” perhaps?) Does the statement, “Man is the Measure of all Things” sound arrogant to your ears? Maybe.

Where is God in all this, you might ask? Well, according to Renaissance philosophers like Pico della Mirandola and Marsiglio Ficino, He made us that way.

Of all the beings God created, only Man can make of himself whatever he wishes. He can assume the nature of the beast or of the angel, brute or saint. The angels became unhappy about God's favoritism towards humans, so the story goes, and some revolted, hence Lucifer. But God went even further according to Christian Humanism—he suffered human death to redeem us—all of us, even those who do not believe in Him. Do you believe that? Do you even agree with some of that? I ask because, you see, that belief, if true, would make even God Himself a Humanist! Not just a proud Father who loves His children, but one who agrees that they are the pinnacle of His creation. Heady stuff!

One political genius of the Renaissance, Niccolò Machiavelli, did disagree in part. He felt that one could fully control only about half of one's destiny; the other half was controlled by *Fortuna* (Fortune or Fate). However, if you had sufficient *Virtu`* (sometimes translated as “manly virtue”) you might be able to beat down *Fortuna*, or, like a river prone to flooding, build a levee around her to limit the damage she could inflict. (That's if you know what you're doing, right?)

One of the most fascinating examples Machiavelli gives of *Virtu`* a sense of your own self-empowerment, however, was not that of a man but of a woman, Caterina Sforza, the Countess of Forlì. One day when her enemies had captured her and her children and demanded that she turn over her fortress to them or they would kill her children, she agreed to go inside to get them the key, but once inside she ran to the top of the parapet of the fortress, looked down upon the crowd where the

soldiers were holding her children, and ripped open her clothes and said: “Do with them what you will. I have the means to make more!” Well, needless to say, the townsmen rallied to her support and her enemies surrendered. No children were killed that day.

While some of this may sound bizarre, or even horrific, (but in light of the stories we’re hearing today, it might even sound mild), to the people emerging from the Middle Ages and the deep economic and political stagnation of feudalism, much of this doctrine of Humanism was considered not only heretical but outrageous. Humanism, Christian or not, was merely paganism resurrected and disguised.

A Dominican Monk named Savonarola not only condemned these ideas but he also condemned all those who upheld them to eternal damnation, and excommunication. Not even powerful rulers like Lorenzo the Magnificent and Pope Alexander VI were exempt (he may have been justified about that last one), warning everyone to repent and to divest themselves of their riches and “vanities” (including those marvelous works of art for which the era was famous) or they would lose their souls. It is said that one very famous artist, Sandro Botticelli, threw some of his own works into those “Bonfires of the Vanities” that Savonarola’s men constructed in the center square of Florence. Savonarola was later burned at the stake himself, as a heretic, by the city, in that very same square, with the blessing of the Pope, by the way. You can see the plaque memorializing the occasion to this day, engraved in the pavement of the Piazza della Signoria.

The fact that these ideas were being expressed at all, from the end of the 14th, throughout the 15th and into the middle of the 16th century, almost undisputed by anyone of learning and status, political, religious or economic, anywhere in the Italian peninsula, with the possible exception of the rural areas of Southern Italy and Sicily because they, like the rest of Europe, were still mired in the political-economic stagnation of feudalism—is remarkable to say the least. The wealth engendered by commerce as opposed to agriculture, made possible the flowering of learning and independent thinking which grinding poverty, hard labor and the disruption of constant warfare, cannot possibly produce.

The humanists of the Italian Renaissance were predominantly bourgeois, middle class merchants, bankers to the world, not landed aristocrats hoarding their privileges but expanding them to include as many entrepreneurs, artisans and scholars who could establish their worth and value to society. It was as though they had something to prove, to make themselves every bit the equals, if not the superiors of those same feudal aristocrats.

In fact, in Florence, that famed guild democratic republic, they passed “Ordinances of Justice” in the 13th century, prohibiting all those who were not members of guilds, merchant or artisan, from voting or running for office in the city government. They felt they needed to control the influence of those renegade aristocrats who were always going to war and disrupting the peace. (Denying them the right to vote might

be considered extreme, perhaps—but if you were an aristocrat which would you prefer: to be voteless, or to lose your head to the guillotine as in 18th century France? This was the 13th century, remember? The numbers of people who had the right to vote anywhere in the world at that time were minuscule to say the least.)

In the 14th century Florence even gave the right to vote to the “ciompi” or day laborers, by admitting them into the lesser guilds (arti minori) of the city. Florence was also responsible for inventing the progressive income tax, and when the King of England defaulted on his loans from the three major banking houses of Florence and it looked like the city itself would go bankrupt, they sold shares in the city’s debt (municipal bonds, we would call them) to their own citizens, thus binding them even closer to the well-being of the city. To take care of all these financial manipulations, a Florentine mathematician named Luca Pacioli invented, (are you ready for this?) double-entry bookkeeping!!

So how does a rich merchant display his worth, his superiority to the aristocrat, his wealth and classical learning? Through the encouragement of the creation of art, music, architecture, the collection, reproduction, and dissemination of books, the establishment and endowment of universities with prominent lecturers and professors, the provision of free schools and libraries for all classes of society, independent of political and religious control—that’s how these men (and women) did it. Patronage unfettered by politics, competition, not cronyism—these are the tools of growth that fuel the explosion of diversity and the tolerance of new ideas, no

matter what the era---and these were abundantly present during this “renaissance”, no matter what you call it.

There is a marvelous portrait of the one-eyed Federigo da Montefeltro, the Duke of Urbino, dressed up in his best armor, accompanied by his young son, Guidobaldo and reading a book! He had had a nick carved into the bridge of his nose so he could see both sides with his one good eye, thus showing that he was every bit as good a warrior as any aristocrat. He was a Condottiere by trade—a mercenary captain, not a landed aristocrat (well, his land was too mountainous to be productive), but his library was the best in the world. It later became the nucleus of the Vatican Library, and if you want to see some of the carved inlaid wooden panels that decorated the walls of his “studiolo”, just go to the Cloisters in New York City where they have been displayed for decades.

The Italian Renaissance, the rediscovery of classical learning and ideas as applied in a Christian, post feudal society on a peninsula that was never unified and could in no way be considered a nation state until the 1860s and 70s, is what makes this achievement even more remarkable. The fact that it is even called “Italian” rather than Florentine, Venetian, Roman or Sieneese or Mantuan or Milanese, or Urbinan, demonstrates that, despite the differences in their political, geographic, and economic situations, they did indeed identify themselves with the life and language of the people of this small country or “patria” as Machiavelli called it. They did see themselves as Italians rooted in Latin or classical history, surrounded by Roman

ruins, laws, customs, artifacts, and traditions, determined to adapt the Tuscan dialect of Dante to every aspect of their daily lives. This cohesion, this like-minded view of the world, was shared with pride by all who lived in that time and place.

Perhaps the best representation of the Renaissance ever devised was that depicted by Raphael in the Stanza della Segnatura (The Pope's Secretariat) in the Vatican. On one wall is the famous "School at Athens" with all the most famous philosophers and mathematicians of the ancient world represented by Raphael's contemporaries: Leonardo Da Vinci, Michelangelo, Bramante and others. On the opposite wall is the "Disputa" or debate over the meaning of the Holy Eucharist showing all the major theologians and saints of the Christian world seated in a semi-circle on either side of a monstrance of the Blessed Sacrament with the Holy Trinity hovering above them. On a third, much smaller wall is a painting of Mt. Parnassus with Apollo surrounded by all the major poets and historians (Homer, Ovid, Cicero, Heroditus etc.) of the ancient world, plus one Italian: Dante. This was a melding of ancient and Christian symbolisms whose meaning no one could possibly mistake.

That the Italian Renaissance was doomed to be crushed by those who saw it as hubris or with envy, depending upon their own shortcomings, and by the confluence of incredible historical events, is tragic, to say the least. The advance of the Turks in the Eastern Mediterranean and with it the cessation of trade with traditional sources of spices and silks, the shifting of such trade to the Atlantic seaboard and the opening up of territories in the Western hemisphere, coupled with the

realization by the newly emergent powers of northern Europe that their huge national war-toughened armies could easily destroy the mercenary or hired bands of soldiers which the small city states of northern and central Italy could field against them, would eventually allow them to completely overrun the entire peninsula and divide it and its spectacular riches among themselves.

And so, for 350 years following the brutal Sack of Rome in 1527 by the combined troops of Spain and Germany, including many Lutherans who believed they were fighting a religious war (far worse than anything visited upon that city by the barbarian invasions of a thousand years earlier) plus the eight month siege of Florence in 1530, Italy was divided up and fought over by France, Spain and the Holy Roman Empire (predominantly Germany and Austria) until all hope of recovery and unity was lost. It is no coincidence that that very same room which Raphael so lovingly painted in the Vatican was overrun by German soldiers in 1527 who scratched Martin Luther's name with their pikes into the wall just below "The School at Athens". You can still see it today if you look closely.

That pride and belief in the indomitable human spirit and dignity, that one could do anything one willed, so central to Humanism, gave way to humiliation and despair. Freedom and self determination was replaced by tyranny and absolute rule imposed by surrogates of northern powers. Gone were the free institutions of government and self-rule so common throughout the Renaissance in Italy. In religion, freedom of thought and discourse were replaced by the Inquisition and the Index of

Forbidden Books following the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation of the Council of Trent.

As a footnote: Michelangelo's famous nude paintings of saints and sinners in his depiction of the Last Judgment in the Sistine Chapel had their "pudenda" or private parts covered by a painter forever dubbed "Signore Britches", after Michelangelo's death, for while he lived, no one dared interfere with his vision of what he considered God's holiest creation—the human figure made in God's own image. After almost five hundred years, the recent restoration of that painting has revealed those original figures in all their glory for anyone wanting to see them today.

The final blow to Italy's waning glory came with the defeat of the Republic of Venice (which had been an independent free state for over 1,100 years) by Napoleon, that icon of the French Revolution, who made a gift of the city to the absolute regime of the Habsburg Empire (Austria). But this tragedy, unlike all the previous ones, had within it the seeds of its own unmaking. For, by spreading the doctrine of "Liberte', Egalite' and Fraternite'", Napoleon's army succeeded in also reviving the spirit of the Italian people and encouraged them to engage in their own Risorgimento, and finally, to unify the peninsula, including Sicily, Southern Italy and the Papal States, under Garibaldi and the Savoyard Monarchy.

The Piemontesi may have appeared to be more French than Italian, and may have engendered much resentment by their foreign ways, but this new unity was for

many Italians, a vast improvement over what had gone before. Parliamentarism, which supposedly limited the power of this “liberal” monarchy at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, was corrupt at the outset, but it eventually gave way to the overturning of the Monarchy (not even Mussolini did that) and the establishment of the Republic of Italy, with true democratic institutions, following World War II. To some extent, I guess, Americans can take some of the credit for that.

So what happened to the ideas behind the Italian Renaissance: To that belief in the indomitable nature of man and his unfettered ability to make of himself what he wills? Look around you. The Enlightenment of the 18th century and the gradual spread of economic diversity throughout Europe, two hundred and fifty years after the Sack of Rome, revived those ideas and gave us the American as well as the French Revolutions, and all the institutions and laws that they entailed. Freedom, human dignity, the desire to improve oneself and one’s condition in the world by whatever honorable means available; self-government, citizenship, community, participatory institutions, equal justice under the law, art, music, philosophy, freedom of thought and religion as well as commerce; the proliferation of libraries, schools, universities, education in whatever field, and a free press (not a controlled press) to speed the dissemination of ideas. All these we owe to that brief explosion of genius and magnificence which we call the Italian Renaissance.

By the way, I was reminded recently when I saw those Katrina bells being sold via the internet, that Florence was the first Republic to use a bell, formerly a strictly religious instrument, to call the people in time of crisis to a “parlamento” or public assembly to discuss important political matters, to the central square of the city in front of the Palazzo della Signoria---the first “Liberty Bell”, in other words. They called it “La Vaca”, the cow, because of its bellowing sound. When the Medici returned to power in Florence following the siege of the city by the Spanish troops, the first thing they did was to destroy the bell. No more “parlamentos” for that city, for 300 hundred years.