

The Renaissance

The Renaissance was a rebirth of interest in the art and learning of ancient Greece and Rome and many historians say that it marked the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of our modern world.

This article will give details about the Renaissance within the context of the Civil Service Examination.

Origin of the Renaissance

The Renaissance began in the universities and monasteries of Italy, where people rediscovered old manuscripts in Latin and Greek on science, art and literature. Some of these manuscripts were brought to Italy by Greek scholars fleeing Constantinople after the city's fall to the Ottoman Empire in 1453. Scholars tried to understand Greek and Roman beliefs, which placed more emphasis on the significance of human life on Earth rather than on an afterlife.

In literature, great Italian poets such as Petrarch began to explore human emotion. By the early 1500s three painters of genius - Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo and Raphael - were at the height of their powers, bringing new energy and realism to the art while architects designed new and elegant buildings that echoed the classical styles of ancient Greece and Rome.

The Renaissance was fueled by new technology. Printing with movable type, developed by Johannes Gutenberg in Germany, made books cheaper and more plentiful, so new ideas could be ready by more people.

The Spread of Humanism

At the turn of the 14th century, a new cultural movement began to take shape in Italy. This was humanism. Humanism promoted the idea that man was the centre of his own universe and that advancements in education, classical arts and science should be accepted for the betterment of humankind

As stated earlier, the invention of the movable printing press helped in the spread of humanism greatly.

The resulting advancement in communication, previously obscure books from humanist authors such as Francesco Petrarch and Giovanni Boccaccio further helped in the interest and promotion of traditional Greek and Roman culture and values. The mass printing of these books helped in further spreading the ideas of humanism among the masses of Europe.

Additionally, many scholars believe advances in international finance and trade impacted culture in Europe and set the stage for the Renaissance.

Humanism encouraged Europeans to question the role of the Roman Catholic church during the Renaissance.

The easy availability of books made education cheap and widespread. Now more people could learn to read and write and interpret ideas and even closely examine religion as they know it. The most significant aspect of the printing press was the fact that the Bible could now be mass-produced and easily accessible by the people themselves for the first time

This led to the Protestant Reformation Movement by the 16th-century German priest Martin Luther. The movement caused a split in the Catholic church as Martin Luther questioned how its practices were aligned with the teachings of the Bible

As a result, a new form of Christianity, known as Protestantism, was created.

Exploration during the Renaissance

By the early 1400s and the late 1500s, Europeans set out to explore the oceans with stronger and sturdier ships made for long voyages into the sea.

When the Eastern Roman Empire (Also known as the Byzantine Empire) fell to the Turks in 1453, the old trade links between Europe and Asia were cut. Of course, European merchants could still visit the old spice markets of West Asia but the spices they procured were at such an exorbitant amount that the economic condition of Europe would deteriorate if they kept buying at the current market rate.

Spices were an essential part of the European diet, not just for flavouring the food but also to preserve it during the harsh winters of the continent. Thus to find new routes to the spice-producing islands and spirit of adventure, Europeans set sail.

The Portuguese were the first to go exploring. The Portuguese prince, Henry the Navigator, took a keen interest in shipbuilding and navigation. He directed Portuguese sailors west into the Atlantic and south to explore the west coast of Africa, where they set up forts and traded in gold and ivory. Spanish, French, Dutch and English sailors followed. Instead of sailing east, some sailed west hoping to find a route to India. The most famous of these voyages resulted in the discovery of the North American continent. It was by Christopher Columbus in 1492, the first 15th-century explorer to cross the Atlantic and return.

It was on 20 May 1498, that another Portuguese explorer, Vasco da Gama landed in the southern coast of India. He effectively discovered a new sea-route towards India

By 1517 the Portuguese had reached China and nearly 30 years later they arrived in Japan. The ships used by the explorers were small but more seaworthy than the clumsy vessels of the Middle Ages. They used a mixture of triangular and square sails for easier steering and greater maneuverability. Sailors had only crude maps and simple instruments to guide them on voyages lasting many months.

In 1519 a Portuguese captain, Ferdinand Magellan, set out from Spain with five ships. The expedition sailed around South America, across the Pacific Ocean to the Philippines (where Magellan was killed in

a fight with the local people) and across the Indian Ocean to Africa. Only one ship found its way to Spain, becoming the first ship to sail completely around the world.

End of the Renaissance

Historians believe that there were several factors that led to the decline of the Renaissance, some are as follows:

1. The Italian peninsula was a focal point of many conquests and wars by warring European factions such as the Spanish and the French. This caused instability and disrupted the region, limiting the spread of the new ideas.
2. The change in trade routes limited the amount of money one could spend in arts and architecture instead, most of the money was diverted towards funding new exploration fleets
3. In response to the Reformation, there was the Counter-reformation which censored artists and writers, stifling creativity. The Council of Trent in 1545 declared humanism or any other views that contradicted the teachings of the Catholic Church as an act of heresy, punishable by death. As a result, many reformists and thinkers fled Italy to more hospitable countries toward the north

By the early 17th century, the Renaissance movement had died out, giving way to the Age of Enlightenment.