

1453 and the Renaissance: There's a nice round number.

If we start our discussion of artistic styles in 1453, we are going to miss a lot. What about the cave paintings at Lascaux, the pyramids of Egypt, and the temples and forums and sculptures of Greece and Rome? What about the vast repertoire of Gregorian chant, the illuminated manuscripts from medieval monasteries, and the imposing cathedrals in the cities and towns of northern Europe?

Yes, much happened in art and culture before 1453. But considering we don't have time to talk about everything, there is a certain logic to starting in 1453. Historians have traditionally and conveniently divided the story of man's civilization into three grand epochs—the Ancient World (until 500 AD), the Middle Ages (from 500 to 1500), and Modern Times (1500 to the present). We are going to be a little more precise and set a specific year—1453—for the beginning of Modern Times.

Of course this is all quite artificial. No congress or council met in 1453 and declared that the Middle Ages were officially over, and from now on everything was going to be Modern. But without divisions such as this, history can become a vast sea of facts stretching out endlessly from an invisible horizon. Our minds need structure to hold onto or else we shall become lost. And so we shall begin by dividing our history into three great parts. And besides, since 1453 is such a strange number we thought it would be easy remember what's going on. So we started an odd-numbered starting point.

The Ancient World achieved a certain level of civilization, and then there was a series of changes that brought about the Middle Ages. Not all of these changes were positive, and the Middle Ages have also been called the Dark Ages. Then in the 14th and 15th centuries things started to change again. To some people it seemed that certain things that had been lost at the end of the ancient world were being reborn in the modern world. And so today we call this first part of the Modern era, this period of reawakening ancient ideas and values, the *Renaissance*, a French word that means "rebirth." That leads to an important question- rebirth of what?

So let's begin by considering what life was like in 1453. For one thing, there was no America. Or at least there was no knowledge of it in the European world, and no knowledge of the European world in America. Those two cultures had not yet been introduced. It is hard for us to imagine America without the Europeans. But it is also hard for us to imagine Europe without America. Think of Ireland without potatoes, France without coffee, Switzerland without chocolate, and Italy without tomatoes! All of these commodities were from the New World, and Europe did not yet know about them. It would take Columbus a few years after 1453 for these changes to come about. But without 1453 and its events there probably would never have been in Columbus. More on that shortly.

Europe did not yet know about a lot of things in 1453. By 1453 spectacles had been invented, but the microscope and telescope had not. The smallest living things anyone knew about were fleas and lice and flecks of pollen large enough to be seen by the naked eye. Scholars believed the world to be round, but thought that the sun, moon, planets, and stars all revolved around the earth. This was not just popular belief, but the official doctrine of the Catholic Church, to which everyone in Western Europe belonged in 1453. It was an ignorant and superstitious and rather cruel world. In the century before 1453 thousands of people were burnt at the stake for witchcraft. Even learned men believed in dragons and unicorns.

By 1453 there were a number of towns, and a few biggish cities. Venice was probably the largest, with around 120,000. London had a population of about 50,000 (just about the size of Idaho Falls). In all of England there were about two million people (today there are over seven million in London alone). Actually the population of Europe was smaller than it had been a little over a century before. In 1348 the bubonic plague, known to the world as the Black Death, arrived in Italy on merchant ships from the Middle East, carried by fleas living on infected rats. It caused one of the most devastating pandemics in history. In the first wave of plague, at least a third of the population of Europe died. Entire towns were wiped out and monasteries were abandoned. There was no germ theory of medicine, and no one had any idea what to do about it. So people got it or didn't get it. When they got it they died or recovered. After everyone in an area had been exposed, the plague would run its course and move on to someplace else.



Pieter Breugel, *The Triumph of Death* (plague inspired)

But in 1453 **three things** happened that signaled the end of an era. **Constantinople fell** to the Turks. The last battle of the **Hundred Years War** was fought. And **Johannes Gutenberg** published books printed with moveable type.

It's hard to imagine today the importance of the fall of Constantinople to the medieval mind. Constantinople was an ancient Greek city, originally called Byzantium. It was situated in what is today called Turkey, on the European side of a narrow straight of water, called the Hellespont, between Europe and Asia. It was here that the Persian King Xerxes built two bridges out of boats to cross the strait when he invaded Greece in 480 BC. Seven centuries later the Roman emperor Constantine, tired of the squalor and disorder of Rome, moved his imperial palace to Byzantium and renamed it, after himself. Now it was Constantinople, not Byzantium.

Before a century had passed, however, the Roman Empire had been split in half, the western half with its capitol in Rome, the eastern with its capitol in Constantinople. The western half fell to barbarians in 476, and Rome would never again rule an empire. But the eastern half persisted for another thousand years, the length of the entire Middle Ages. Throughout this time everyone called it the Eastern Roman Empire, although a better name was the Byzantine Empire, since it no longer had anything to do with Rome.

Constantinople also served as a center of world trade it connected the science, the spices, silks and wares of the eastern world- principally Moslem- with the Christian West. Christian traders from the West – principally Venice were happy to trade with other Christians in Constantinople. The conquest of Toledo in Spain in 1085 and the Crusades to the Holy Land of the 11 and 1200's brought Europe into contact with

the more advanced civilizations of the Islamic world. The influence of their technologies.

In 1453 Mehmed II, Sultan of the Ottoman Turks, besieged Constantinople and took it, and whatever was left of the Roman Empire vanished into the sands of time. The Turks eventually gave the city a Turkish name, and now it's Istanbul not Constantinople.



Mehmed II lays siege to Constantinople

The fall of Constantinople was momentous for more than symbolic reasons. The Byzantine Empire had been a haven for ancient art, culture, and learning. The ancient Greeks had represented the pinnacle of artistic and cultural achievement, and the Romans had brought the Greek culture west and spread it throughout Europe. When Rome fell in the fifth century, Western Europe slid into the Dark Ages and much of this learning and culture was lost. But it was preserved in the east, in the manuscripts and art collections of the wealthy and learned citizens of Constantinople. When Constantinople fell, many of these citizens escaped on Italian ships, carrying their books and art with them. Most of them settled in Italy, and as we shall see, contributed to a rage for all things ancient that was sweeping the Western world.

As great as the fall of Constantinople was on expanding scholarship to the west- its economic impact in the west would be far more profound. The Venetians had secured a trade treaty with the Turks and the thirst for these now harder to get spices was greater than ever. As competition along the trade routes to the east grew increasingly brisk, merchants from other up and-coming countries in Europe had tried to find ways to compete with the Italians. Prince Henry the Navigator (1394-1460) encouraged his Portuguese subjects to explore the coast of Africa in hopes of discovering a way around. By 1488 the Portuguese had found their way to India

along this route. In the early Middle Ages Spain was almost entirely conquered by the Muslims (Moors) from North Africa. But for half a millennium Spanish Christian princes had waged a war of reconquest, the Reconquista. In 1492 Granada, the last Moorish citadel, fell. The victors were the two principal Spanish monarchs, Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile, who celebrated their victory by getting married, uniting the kingdom of Spain under a single crown. In 1492, the same year she became queen of a united Spain, Isabella hooked her crown jewels to front an Italian explorer named Cristoforo Columbo on his quest to find India by sailing west. To his dying day, Columbus insisted the locals in his new-found colonies were Indians (they weren't) but he had found something much more momentous than a simple trade route. The Spanish conquistadors did not miss a beat, and soon they were praying to St. James as they brought down the Aztec and Inca empires, transplanting the cross on American soil and bringing back galleons laden with Mexican silver and Peruvian gold. The fall of Constantinople had a real impact on the Old World and led to the discovery of the New World.

The Fall of Constantinople in 1453 ended a centuries-long battle between the Muslim world and the Byzantine Empire. The same year saw the end of another enduring conflict, the Hundred Years' War. This war was mostly about the kings of England insisting that they should also be the kings of France. They made the argument with genealogy charts, but they enforced their point of view with the sword, or more accurately, with the bow. The Hundred Years' War saw the end of medieval warfare, which was built on the principle of big knights in impervious armor smashing into each other in a sporting fashion and lopping off the heads of any foot soldier who happened to get in the way.

In the Hundred Year's War, the English longbow changed all of that. At Crecy a much larger force of mounted French knights was decimated by massed English longbowmen—the French knights suffered 5000-10000 casualties, while only a few hundred English bowmen perished. The longbow won the day again at Poitiers and at Agincourt and the day of the armored knight was over. By the end of the war the longbow itself was outmoded as gunpowder began to appear on the European stage.



English Longbowmen against French Knights at Agincourt

In the end the French managed to win the day, but only when they turned the management of the war into the hands of a visionary young woman named Joan of Arc, who led a citizens' army against the English invaders. The English captured Joan and burnt her at the stake, but the spark of French resistance had been led, and soon the English only held a small fortress at Calais on the English Channel. The final battle of the Hundred Years War was fought in 1453, leaving England and France as separate nations.

The Hundred Years War and the fall of Constantinople changed the fate of empires. But Johannes Gutenberg changed the way we read, the way we write, the way we think, and in large measure the way Europe worshipped. Gutenberg was a goldsmith, and it was his interest in metal and metal alloys that led him to experiment with a process of mass-producing moveable type. Before Gutenberg the only effective way to reproduce a written text was to hand copy it. Throughout the Middle Ages one of the main duties of a monk was to make copies. This became a great art form, and monasteries produced stunningly beautiful manuscripts.



Book of Hours, Valencia

But the difficulty of the copying process kept books rare and expensive. If you were a student, the main thing you did was travel around to the places where the books were and listen to a lecturer read them aloud. Few, even among the rich, had a private copy of the scriptures. Reading was an exotic art, and the transmission of stories, poems, songs, and knowledge was mainly an oral tradition.

Gutenberg often gets the credit for inventing moveable type, but actually it had seen limited use for several centuries in China and Korea. But Gutenberg mechanized it and made it into a lucrative business. First he invented a process for mass-producing his type using an alloy of lead, tin, and antimony, the same components that are used today. He invented an oil-based ink that produced characters that were sharper and clearer than anything seen before. He invented a press based on the screw action used by olive and wine presses of the day. Most important, he combined all of these inventions into a process that made the mass production of books and other written documents economically viable for both printers and customers. Gutenberg's first big project was a Bible, renowned to this day for its beauty and precision. Gutenberg's printing press could produce 200 Bibles in the same amount of time as a group of monks copying by hand the scriptures. In addition the cost of paper (made from discarded linen cloth) was a fraction of the expense of using the expensive vellum which was a leather product. With the cost of books dropping it was only natural that literacy would be more widespread.



A page from Gutenberg's Bible (notice how this page still featured some hand painting)

Within a generation of Gutenberg's big idea, books were flooding Europe. Soon reading was commonplace, at least among the educated. Writers wrote for publication, knowing that their works would receive a wide audience. Politicians, theologians, philosophers, and scientists wrote to be read by an ever-growing audience. Before the invention of the printing press the main way for transmitting ideas was to talk about them. Now print became the vehicle for transmitting complex ideas. More than that, writing became a way of thinking, and reading a way of understanding someone else's thoughts. Writing made it easier to formulate a long, well-reasoned argument, and reading made it easier to follow one. It was easier access to the Bible which allowed a monk named Martin Luther to reshape the religious landscape of Western Europe - and by extension the United States. We'll read more about that shortly. Printed books could have a wide audience, and thus learned men from all over Europe were able to exchange ideas on an unprecedented scale. It is no exaggeration to say that today we think the way we think, and know the things we know, thanks to Herr Gutenberg's invention, which was well underway by the year 1453.

In an artistic sense the printing press also meant that it was no longer practical to hand illustrate books in the old style. Albrecht Durer's most famous works, like *Knight, Death and the Devil* exist because of printing. Woodcuts and engravings were produced by the same means as Gutenberg's Bible. Mass produced art was born.

Thus 1453 is one of the dates offered as the beginning of modern times. It's somewhat of an irony that we call this time period the Renaissance, a term that has less to do with modern things than with ancient things. The artists and philosophers of the Renaissance believed that Greece and Rome had achieved a pinnacle of culture, which was largely lost when Rome fell and Roman civilization deteriorated into the "Dark Ages." The Renaissance thinkers saw the Middle Ages as a time when little or no progress was made in art and culture, and they believed that if their own society were to equal the glories of the past, they would need to study and then implement the art and craft of ancient times.

At its basic level, then, the Renaissance was a nostalgia for the bygone glories of ancient times. Rome had fallen to the barbarians, and its glories sank back into the earth—quite literally, it turns out. For a thousand years the great temples and public buildings of the Roman Forum were used as cattle sheds, until by the 1400s they were buried in manure. When a renewed interest in ancient things took hold of the Italians, they performed massive excavations to bring Roman architecture, sculpture, and mosaic to the surface. As the Italians beheld these recovered works of art, they were astonished at the ancients' apparent love of life and fascination with humanity.

If we were to ask Renaissance means rebirth of what? The answer becomes not of Greek religion but of the Greek and Roman ideas of **humanism**. Humanism is the concept best expressed by the ancient Greek philosopher Protagoras who said, "Man is the measure of all things." Renaissance humanism is profoundly Christian but recognizes that the observable world- the natural world of human beings is tremendously important. Renaissance humanists believed that man was God's greatest creation, that the world was beautiful and to properly and accurately depict the natural world in paint, in poetry, in stone other sculptural media was an act of religious reverence.

Perhaps no Renaissance literary passage better reflects this attitude than these two:

First, Pico della Mirandola, a humanist from the Italian city of Florence, wrote that after God had created the earth and placed its vegetable and animal life on it, "the Divine Artificer still longed for some creature which might comprehend the vast meaning of so vast an achievement, which might be moved with love at its beauty and smitten with awe at its grandeur." After considering things, God decided that man "should have a share in the endowment of every other creature." Man would have the nature of both the animals beneath him and the gods and angels above him. When God had created the first man, he said to him:

We have given you, Oh Adam, no visage proper to yourself, nor any endowment

properly your own, in order that whatever place, whatever form, whatever gifts you can, with premeditation, select, these same you may have and possess through your own judgment and decision.

The nature of all other creatures is defined and restricted within laws which We have laid down; you, by contrast, impeded by no such restrictions, may, by your own free will, to whose custody we have assigned you, trace for yourself the lineaments of your own nature...We have made you a creature neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, in order that you may, as the free and proud shaper of your own being, fashion yourself in the form you may prefer. It will be in your power to descend to the lower, brutish forms of life; you will be able, through your own decision, to rise again to the superior orders whose life is divine.

The second comes from Shakespeare who spoke through Hamlet (even though Hamlet himself isn't too keen on people):

What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason, how infinite in faculty!
In form and moving how express and admirable! In action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god!

The beauty of the world. The paragon of animals.
And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust?

Renaissance writers came to admire the ancient patterns in theatre and literature. William Shakespeare's plays frequently harken back to ancient days (Julius Caesar, Titus Andronicus). In addition, Shakespeare has taken the basic structure and theory of tragedy that we've already examined and adapted it for the audiences of his day (and ours).

Renaissance Visual Art

Renaissance artists began to study the natural world and anatomy. Michelangelo and others actually dissected cadavers to more accurately understand the placement of muscles and joints and skin so that when they sculpted figures they would create works that would appear to be human- or at least more human than they had appeared since ancient Roman and Greek statues. This naturalism in the visual arts was made possible due to a couple of very significant developments. First around 1400 artists in Northern Europe took linseed oil and combined it with pigment to create **oil paint**. Jan van Eyck (perhaps the inventor of oil paint) was now able to produce images of tremendous detail and naturalism, like his *Arnolfini Marriage*. Within 100 years tempera and fresco would fall by the wayside as oil became the preferred painting medium. Oil paint as you recall allows for greater modeling of three-dimensional figures and the depiction of more naturalistic views. The other great development in Renaissance visual art is the use of **perspective**. The artist and architect Brunelleschi developed a system of linear perspective, while artists like Leonardo used the new medium of oil paint to produce the color shifts associated with atmospheric (aerial) perspective.

The subject matter of Renaissance art also moved from the strictly religious themes of the Middle Ages toward greater variety. Michelangelo's most famous works, The

Sistine Chapel frescoes, *The Pieta*, *David* and *Moses*, to be sure were all Biblical- but even in the ceiling of the Pope's Sistine Chapel the artist juxtaposed Greek and Roman mythological figures with Old Testament prophets.

Pope Julius II commissioned Raphael to paint the frescos in his treaty hall. *The School of Athens* is the absolute embodiment of the Renaissance. Here the classical (ancient Greek and Roman) scholars like Pythagoras, Homer, Euclid and Ptolemy flank the central figures of Plato and Aristotle. Interestingly enough, the figure representing Plato is a portrait of Leonardo da Vinci and the man in the boots seated in the foreground- Heraclites is Michelangelo.



Raphael, *School of Athens*

Beyond these appeals to antiquity in the visual arts Renaissance Humanism manifests itself in other subject matter. Think about the most famous painting in the world, a Renaissance piece, Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*. Who is she? She's not a Biblical figure, she's not an early Christian saint- she's not even a nun. On the other hand she's also not a Greek goddess. Who is this mystery woman? Well it turns out she's the wife of a banker from Milan- an ordinary (albeit wealthy) human. The Renaissance begins this modern practice (discarded since Roman times) of creating portraits of individuals. Raphael painted portraits as well as works like *School*. Consider Mr. and Mrs. Giovanni Arnolfini- real people in real settings.

How Renaissance Art Changed the World or Michelangelo Made Martin Luther Possible

Pope Julius II dreamed of a new, better (might we say re-born) papal church in Rome. A new St. Peter's would replace the old Saint Peter's built by Constantine over 1000 years earlier. St. Peter's Basilica was originally built over the burial place of Peter the apostle, held by the Catholic Church to be the first pope. Now the ancient building was to be rebuilt in an unprecedented fashion. Architects, painters, and sculptors were brought in from all over Italy to work on the project. Julius hired Michelangelo to paint the ceiling of the pope's private place of worship, the Sistine Chapel, and later Michelangelo would paint the rear wall and design the new dome that would crown St. Peter's. Raphael would paint murals in the papal apartments. No earthly monarch would ever have a more splendid palace.

Building projects cost money, and the Renaissance popes tended to be rather unscrupulous in how they raised it. In some cases church offices were sold to the highest bidder; in some places there were tables of fees created for church services, such as baptisms, weddings, and funeral masses. Without doubt the most controversial practice was the sale of indulgences. To understand how this worked, you have to know a little about Catholic theology. A Catholic believes that when a person dies, there are three places that person can go: holy people like saints go directly to heaven; base sinners go to hell. But most people are neither saints nor sinners. Thus the average Christian has to spend some time in purgatory, where they are punished of unrepented sins.

But in the 1400s the popes claimed that some saints were so righteous that they actually committed more good deeds than were necessary to get into heaven. These good deeds, the popes said, accumulated in a Treasury of Merits, and the pope had the authority (part of his "bind on earth and in heaven" power) to dispense those merits to paying customers.

Thus if your mother died, you could go to a priest and pay him to dispense merits on her behalf, thus shortening her time in purgatory. This practice raised lots of money and financing the building of St. Peter's and the Papal States, but it is easy to see how controversial it would become.

As the story goes, in 1517 an Augustinian friar in the German town of Wittenberg heard a

Dominican monk hawking indulgences with a little jingle: "As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs." Martin Luther (1483- 1546) was so incensed that he went home and penned ninety-five theses, or arguments, against the sale of indulgences. The next morning he nailed them to his church door; he also sent them to his bishop. No one needed money to be saved, Luther said, and he who believed that money could save him was surely damned. Thanks to the printing press Luther's theses were soon all over Europe, and students thronged to Wittenberg to hear Luther speak.

It was not Luther's intention, at least not at first, to make a break with the Catholic Church. He was simply out to make some theological points and hopefully

encourage church-wide reform. Luther's bishop did not respond to the ninety-five theses; instead, he forwarded them to the pope, who employed a group of theologians to examine them.

Back and forth the argument went until in 1520 the pope finally excommunicated Luther. The following year Luther was called before the Emperor Charles V to defend himself against charges of heresy.

Fortunately for Luther the northern German princes were on his side (they had no love for Italian Popes taking their money), and they insisted that the Emperor respect Luther's safe conduct. But the break was complete. By the late 1520s Luther had created a new church in Germany.

Luther developed three doctrines that would become key to all Protestant religion. The first was salvation by faith. Paying for indulgences did not bring one to heaven. Neither did any good works, for that matter. Instead, a Christian was saved by his faith in Christ. Second, ultimate authority for doctrinal matters rested in the Bible. The answer to the question of salvation by faith or by works was determined not by the declaration of a pope, but by consulting the scriptures. Thus Luther translated both the Bible into German (his translation of the Bible is still the standard version used by German Latter-Day Saints). The word of God should be in the language of the believers. Finally, priesthood was held by all true believers. The pope had no authority to excommunicate Luther for his true beliefs. Biblical truth was the source Luther's priesthood, not some church hierarchy centered in Rome. To illustrate the point, Luther renounced his monastic vows, married a former nun, and fathered six children.

Luther's ideas inspired other protestant reformers throughout Europe and created an enormous challenge for the Catholic Church. What was the proper way to respond? How can they regain their position? That will form the basis of our next historical stylistic section, for out of the age of the reformation will spring a new artistic age which came to be known as the Baroque.

Let's summarize the Renaissance: If the philosophy of humanism hadn't been brought to greater prominence in Western Europe by scholars fleeing Constantinople and published throughout Europe on presses like Gutenberg's, then the artistic styles of artists like Michelangelo and Raphael wouldn't have been developed or popular. If Michelangelo and Raphael hadn't achieved such fame, Pope Julius and others wouldn't have hired them to decorate and redesign the Vatican. If they hadn't decorated and designed the Vatican so extensively, then the Church would have had less need to raise money through the sale of indulgences leading Luther to protest- largely through the means of the printing press. It is amazingly interconnected isn't it?