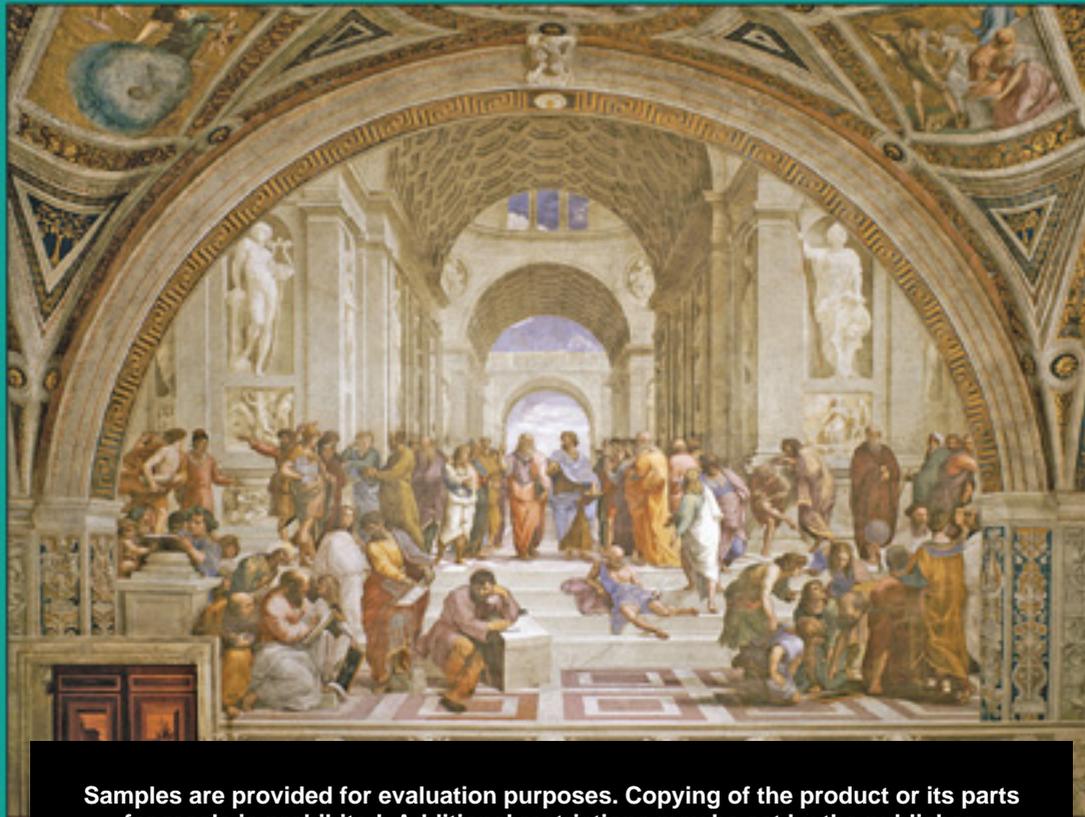


History
UNFOLDING

EUROPEAN RENAISSANCE



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MindSparks
CHALLENGING STUDENTS TO THINK HISTORICALLY

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Introduction

An Emerging Europe

In the mid-1300s, the Black Plague swept away perhaps a fourth of Europe's population. Most of the rest faced a bleak and limited existence. Life was lived in the village or manor. Political loyalties rarely extended beyond the local lord or prince. And knowledge of the world beyond this local setting was scanty and usually more myth than fact.

Europe lagged far behind China, India, and the Islamic Middle East in terms of scientific knowledge, technical prowess, and awareness of the world at large.

And yet, this time of stagnation was already passing. Since the 1100s, some parts of Europe had begun to revive. Trade with the outside world was expanding. Knowledge of ancient classical writers such as Aristotle was filtering in from Islamic cultural centers in Spain and elsewhere. At first, this revival did not upset older ways of thinking or the Church-dominated cultural patterns of the Middle Ages. It was left to the Italian Renaissance to do that.

Historians argue about how much of a break with the past the Renaissance actually was. Every era of change always builds on what came before. But with the Renaissance, a whole new spirit does shine through in literature, art, architecture, politics, and more. It is a spirit that celebrates with new force the powers of the individual and the value of human existence in this world. While looking backward to its classical past, this spirit actually laid the foundation for a powerful and dynamic future.

This set uses 12 visual displays to focus on some of the key themes in the history of the European Renaissance. Each lesson uses three visual displays to explore one broad topic in the overall story. Briefly, the four lessons are as follows:

The Passing of the Middle Ages

A look at the shifting social context that helps explain why the Renaissance arose first in the city-states of Italy in the 1300s and 1400s.

The Spirit of Humanism

The Renaissance looked to the classical past not for the first time, but in a very new way. It found in that past a celebration of the individual, of the striving for excellence, and of a vigorous life of action in this world.

The Renaissance in Art

Renaissance art reflected a new fascination with the world. The technique of perspective must be seen in this context—that it helped artists to focus on actual human experience, rather than on depicting physical objects symbolically in order to reveal higher spiritual truths.

The Renaissance in the North

The spirit of the Renaissance shifted as it moved north, where it was more strongly influenced by the Reformation and by the emergence of a wider, less elite audience.

Using Photos, Cartoons, and Other Visuals to Teach History

Many textbooks are full of colorful visuals. However, all too often these visuals function primarily as window dressing. They make the text more entertaining, or at least more palatable. Only occasionally do the visuals in textbooks do more than offer simple pictorial reinforcement of ideas already presented in the text. In many cases, they pander to the visual orientation of the young while doing little to help young people master the challenges of the visual media that dominate their lives.

By way of contrast, our approach to using visual materials emphasizes their unique strengths as historical documents. The lessons in this booklet focus students on the visual symbols and metaphors in editorial cartoons, the dramatic qualities of certain photographs, the potential of many images to make abstract ideas more specific and concrete, the implicit biases and stereotypes in certain images, their emotional power, and their ability to invoke the spirit of a time and place. In the process, we make every effort to strengthen students' visual literacy skills in general, as well as their ability to think critically and engage in spirited but disciplined discussions.

How to Use This Booklet

The booklet is divided into four lessons, with three illustrations per lesson. Each lesson consists of the following:

A BACKGROUND INFORMATION SHEET This page provides brief summaries explaining the three illustrations on which the lesson is based and their relevance to the lesson's objectives.

DIGITAL IMAGES The booklet's PDF allows you to project the images for use in your class discussions.

DISCUSSION-ACTIVITY SHEETS

Each sheet displays one illustration. It includes a sequence of questions to help you plan an all-class discussion while using the projected images. The questions take students step by step through an analysis of the illustration. If you wish, you may reproduce these pages and hand them out. In addition to the discussion questions on the illustration itself, one or two follow-up activities are suggested. Some of these can be made into individual assignments. Others will work best as small-group or all-class activities.

*The European Renaissance***OBJECTIVE**

1. Students will gain a better understanding of some of the key underlying factors helping to bring about the change from medieval Europe to the time known as the European Renaissance.

The Passing of the Middle Ages

Use the background information on this page to help your students better understand the three illustrations making up this lesson. The questions and activities presented in the rest of the lesson can be used to help students clarify meanings and debate important issues.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION**Illustrations 1A & 1B**

“Renaissance” means “revival” or “rebirth.” The European Renaissance was a time when Europeans looked back to the ideas and achievements of the ancient Greeks and Romans. It was also a key turning point for the future, launching the modern age for Europe and, in time, the world. It began in the late 1300s as Europe was slowly emerging from the poverty and backwardness of the Middle Ages. The fortified manor house on the left suggests the local and rural basis of society as well as the insecurity of life then. Adding to the insecurity were frequent famines and the horrors of the “Black Death” of the mid-1300s, depicted on the right. Memories of that awful time were still fresh as the Renaissance began.

Illustration 2

In the late Middle Ages, some regions of Europe did start to thrive. This was most true at first of Italy, where powerful city-states arose whose wealth was based on trade. A city-state was made up of a governing city and the land around it. Venice, shown here, was one such city-state. Venice grew rich as a key end-point on trade routes from Asia across the Middle East to Europe. Trade with Asia put the Italian city-states in contact with much more advanced civilizations, such as the Byzantine Empire, the Islamic lands of the Middle East, India, and China. With greater leisure time and wealth, the rulers and merchants of the Italian city-states began to take a new interest in the world around them, both past and present.

Illustrations 3A & 3B

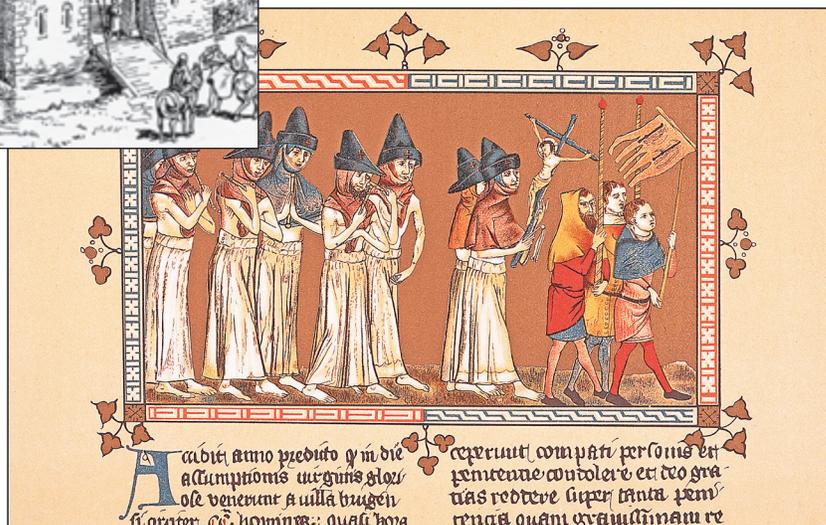
To carry on trade, merchants often needed to borrow money. So, too, did Europe’s kings and princes—in part to pay for increasingly costly wars. Powerful families of merchant bankers arose in the Italian city-states to make these loans—for example, the Medici family of Florence. Cosimo di Medici (left) was a shrewd banker who also gave generously to the arts. Pope Leo X (right) was also a Medici. This painting typical of Renaissance art depicts him with a wary look, a man with power and politics as well as spiritual matters on his mind. Pope Leo was also a great patron of the arts. Many rich Italian bankers and merchants supported Italy’s great flowering of art and scholarship. The economic and political power of this rising, worldly middle class was what made the Renaissance possible.

Lesson 1 – The Passing of the Middle Ages

Illustrations 1A & 1B



1A: Stock Montage, Inc.



1B: Stock Montage, Inc.

Discussing the Illustrations

1. These images are of Europe in the late 1300s. One great era in Europe's history was coming to an end. It had been a time when life was difficult and insecure, What this era in European history called?
2. What do Illustration 1A's details help show about farming, level of technology, family life, and security in the Middle Ages?
3. In the Middle Ages, famine and disease were all too common. Illustration 1B shows a procession during the Black Death. What was the Black Death? What do you think this solemn procession was about? What does it suggest about reactions in Europe to the Black Death?
4. As the Middle Ages drew to a close in the late 1300s, it was followed, at first in Italy and then elsewhere in Europe, by a time known as the "Renaissance." The word "renaissance" means "rebirth." Based on your history reading so far, can you explain what was supposedly being "reborn" in Europe at this time?

Follow-up Activities

1. Read more about everyday life in the late Middle Ages. Imagine you live in this fortified manor house. It is 1350. The plague is devastating Europe, as are numerous wars. Your area is suffering terribly as well. You have seen the effects of the plague up close. Write a letter to a friend in a far off city about the latest developments in your community. Be sure to describe the entire course of the plague from first exposure until death. One account of the plague can be found at the beginning of Boccaccio's *The Decameron*.
2. The Renaissance supposedly restored Europe's interest in the ancient classical literature of Greece and Rome. But was there no interest at all in the ancient classics prior to the Renaissance? Read parts of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Write a brief report on the *Divine Comedy* and its view of the world. Find out who Virgil was, and explain why Dante has him as his guide through Hell and Purgatory. Finally, explain what this says about Dante's view of the classical world in the centuries before the Renaissance.