

### Chapter Objectives

- Give a concise explanation for how the Renaissance initiated the modern age.
- Describe how Leonardo da Vinci illustrates key ideas of the Renaissance.
- Define and illustrate the central value of Renaissance thought—humanism.

As we saw in the last chapter, the Middle Ages came to a rather bleak end. Within the medieval hierarchical system, people couldn't make sense of what was happening to them. A different worldview—the modern worldview—is going to emerge from all this chaos; and although there will be much “truth” in the new way of looking at the world in terms of the scientific advances and so on, there is going to be much error that we are going to want to see as well, primarily as we see the rise of humanism in modern culture.

Once again, we are at a period of change, a period of transition as we're leaving the Middle Ages and entering the modern world. So all those old questions of how a culture changes come right at us again, and we don't have simple answers to any of those questions. We are going to try to define some things, we are going to label some things, and we are going to mark off historical periods and talk about them as if we know what we are talking about. But really, the emperor has no clothes as we

study the past and the reality is we don't have much of a clue about how and why things change the way they do. Our attitude when we look at a historical phenomenon this complex should be one of humility as we approach it from a scholarly point of view. We should recognize how little we really know in the face of the sovereignty of God over history.

Historians grapple with complex problems like this and they give it their best shot; but we always fall short of a complete answer. The Renaissance is like that. Literally, a period of cultural “rebirth,” the **Renaissance** is the portal into the modern age. We leave the Middle Ages and the rubble of the hierarchical worldview behind and we see in the Renaissance that men are struggling to create a new world. That's why we will be referring to the Renaissance as the portal, or gateway into the modern age. The humanists we'll be studying—artists and intellectuals of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries—saw themselves as “modern” men. That was their word; they coined it to describe the time they lived in. They knew they were leaving the Middle Ages behind and they were struggling to figure out what are going to be the values now of this new world they were helping to create. We want to look at where they got inspiration from and what motivated them. What were the values that resonated with them as they looked at the past? These are the questions we'll be exploring in this chapter.

## Background to the Renaissance

But as we enter into this portal, I want to emphasize once again that the Renaissance, like the fall of Rome, is a great historical problem. That's a description I don't use lightly or casually. It means something very specific. We defined it once before but let's define it again in this context so that we can be reminded of the difficulty of what we are doing when we try to make sense of a period like this. *A historical problem is a set of circumstances so complex that it defies easy explanation.* And having said that, I always quickly add that an easy explanation is exactly what you and I, as human beings, want. We simplify, we generalize; sometimes we oversimplify and over-generalize in our attempt to understand and make sense of things. But we want the easy answer—and history doesn't give easy answers up very easily. Certainly, not as you look at the fall of Rome; what caused it? We don't have a clue.

What caused the Renaissance? We don't know. We have ideas, of course, but we can't explain all the complexity of what was going on in western culture that led to a "rebirth." We don't necessarily have explanations; but we have interpretations and theories, and that's what I'll be giving you as we go through this. Obviously, we know there was something that happened that was transforming in Europe in the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. We know it because we see the change in culture, we see the change in art, we see the change in all the institutions of western culture. We labeled it the Renaissance and we are going to be trying our best to make sense of that. Let me start with the definition. We will just go with a textbook definition of the Renaissance. We will go through this carefully and draw out the meaning of the different phrases and terms that we are going to use.

The Renaissance was a great cultural movement that brought about a period of scientific revolution and artistic transformation at the dawn of modern European history.

Now, you and I think that we live in the

modern world. We think the modern world is synonymous with our generation. It's kind of a way in which people have always thought about these things; but history teaches us to take a very long view. The modern age is actually several hundred years in the making. Historians usually date it as five or six hundred years. We are probably at the tail end of the modern age; actually, we are entering into something different as we analyze the historical trends that we see. The Renaissance as I said is the portal that gets us into the modern age. If we are going to understand the values of this world we live in right now, then we will have to come to terms with how these humanistic thinkers at the dawn of the modern age were looking at the world and looking at the past.

Let's isolate two aspects of the Renaissance from this definition. First, note the phrase "scientific revolution." Science really does define much of the modern age. We look at the world right now on the breathtaking pace of technological advance. We look at the phenomenal scientific accomplishments of the twentieth century, and science is very much a reality of the last half a millennium. We see that coming to fruition in the period of the Renaissance. The scientific revolution of the seventeenth century is something we'll examine more fully in a few chapters.

The second thing to note is the phrase, "artistic transformation." Clearly, the art of the Renaissance is going to undergo a major facelift, and it's going to be defined by new styles and new ways of looking at the world. This is the age of Michelangelo, of Leonardo da Vinci. Other great artists of this period that we're going to be looking at are Raphael and Botticelli. This is one of the high points in all of Western cultural history. So clearly, we think of these two things as direct outgrowths and consequences of whatever this phenomenon is that we're calling the "Renaissance."

Scientific revolution points us to the notion of rationalism, the faculty of human reasoning. This is the belief that the human mind,



reason, the critical faculty can comprehend the world, can figure out the mysteries of the universe. We found that the Greeks believed that their rational minds could do that. Rationalism was one of those keywords that we used to understand Greek culture, their philosophy, the way they produced their art and their architecture as an expression of human reason. And we're going to see that in the modern age, rationalism is clearly a philosophy of our time as well. You look around at modern scientific thinking and in our own time, and there is this extraordinary pride, this hubris about what man can do and what man can figure out, the notion that science will unlock and unravel the great mysteries of human life and the origins of the cosmos. And that rationalism, so typical of the ancient Greeks, is reborn in the modern age in this period that we call the Renaissance.

There's another word that should come to mind; and that is "humanism." We can relate this concept to the phrase "artistic transformation" in our definition. We're going to see in the art of the Renaissance, in the art of Michelangelo, da Vinci, and so on, that humanism is the hallmark. It's the philosophy that motivates them in all they do. They believe deeply in the dignity and worth of human beings and human existence, and they are setting that up as the standard for all that they do in culture—in the way they paint, in the way they sculpt, in the way they philosophize about the world. This is true of the Renaissance and it was also true of the ancient Greeks. The ancient Greeks were humanists, just as the ancient Greeks were rationalists. What is this pointing us to? The Renaissance is the rebirth of classical values and classical ideas having to do with ancient Greek and Roman culture.

Well, what about the Middle Ages? Didn't these artists and intellectuals, standing at the dawn of the modern age, draw inspiration from the Middle Ages as well? No. The Renaissance humanists looked back at the period that immediately preceded them with contempt. The last thing they wanted to be was *medieval*. That old hierarchical

way of looking at the world was something they were rejecting. People like Michelangelo and da Vinci saw themselves as Christians, but they didn't want to be like medieval Christians. They wanted to be more like the ancient Greeks—rationalists and humanists. We're going to see them trying to do that, to be Christians on the one hand as well as being classical humanists on the other. Good luck trying to mix truth and error, but that's what they're trying to do. It will be a fool's errand to try to be a "Christian humanist." But we're going to see that a whole lot of really good art will be produced in pursuit of that unattainable goal.

Ultimately, that project will fail, as Michelangelo, late in his life, would acknowledge. He looked back at the works that he created, so full of humanistic ideas and philosophy, and he looked back at that with regret and realized that it was a failure. He would in a sense repent of those motives. We are going to be able to look back and see what they were trying to do as they tried to synthesize these two values that just don't go together at all—Christianity and pagan classical humanism. They had contempt for the Middle Ages, and by the way, with that in mind, let me just say a couple of things about the terminology that we are using here.

These men that I am referring to, these Renaissance humanists of the fifteenth century, they pretty much came up with the terms that we are using. They invented the word "modern," as we've seen. They also came up with the terms "Middle Ages" and "medieval." As they looked at this period that they had contempt for and wanted to get away from, they called it the Middle Ages. They viewed it as the unfortunate period of time between the classical age of the Greeks and Romans and their own age, the modern age. The Middle Ages—that was just the forgettable stuff in between, in the middle of two glorious periods.

These Renaissance humanists also gave us the word "classical." They looked back at the Greeks and the Romans and they said, "Those guys were the classics. That was the

Classic Age. We want to be like them." Finally, they also gave us the word "Gothic," as in Gothic architecture. Remember those great cathedrals, those masterpieces of stone and glass? These Renaissance humanists of the fifteenth century weren't terribly impressed by those at all. They looked at them as decadent, as everything that classical architecture was not. They judged Gothic architecture by the standards of Greek architecture, which is a foolish thing to do. Gothic churches weren't trying to be Greek temples; and yet they looked at it that way and they demeaned and downgraded the style as *Gothic*—that is, the style (as they wrongly believed it to be) of the Gothic tribes that destroyed Rome. They wanted to revive Greek and Roman styles of architecture in opposition to the medieval styles in building cathedrals.

So they are looking at the Middle Ages contemptuously, and they are looking at the classical world with reverence and trying to draw their inspiration from those values. That's why they are rationalists. That's why they are humanists as the Greeks were.



Can you think of a Renaissance figure right off the top of your head who would best illustrate both of these qualities of rationalism and humanism of scientific revolution and artistic transformation, these two aspects of the renaissance? Leonardo da Vinci is called a Renaissance man. What we mean by that is somebody who is deeply curious about the world and all aspects of knowledge, art and science alike—and da

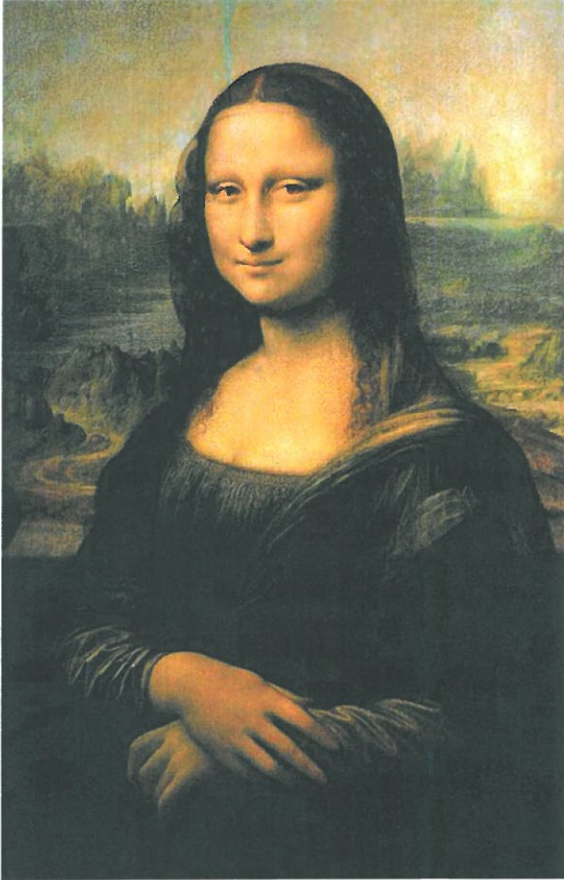
Vinci really illustrates that. This deep curiosity about the world is reflected in his notebooks. These are drawings from the notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci, our classic Renaissance man, who illustrates the new science and new art. Look at what he is drawing and thinking about. He is sketching out the human body and the muscle structure, for example. (See above.) He knew what the muscle structure was like because he would actually dissect cadavers so that he could get a better understanding of the underlying muscular and skeletal structure of the human body. He didn't have some macabre interest in that. That's not what motivated him. It was a scientific curiosity to understand the human body as a scientific phenomenon, but he was also thinking as an artist, not just as a scientist. He figured that if he could see the skeletal structure and the muscular structure of the body, he would be able to draw and paint the body more realistically as an artist.



So you see both of these qualities at work, science and art. He is trying to figure out how we can harness the laws of nature, and scientific knowledge and principles of mathematics, to create helicopters, to create parachutes. (See above.) He is studying and measuring the structure of trees and plants. The mind of science, the mind of art, bringing these things together, blending them together, trying to understand the world, not just receiving the knowledge that's passed down through the old medieval hierarchy, but rather as a modern man



trying to figure it out for himself, scientifically, putting it to the test, calculating, checking in out for himself. We see that new spirit of modern thinking very clearly illustrated in da Vinci. There's much more to da Vinci than the "Mona Lisa." Behind that famous painting lies a boundless curiosity about the world.



The Renaissance is divided into three periods: early, middle, and late. The early Renaissance period is usually dated from 1400 to 1475. The most important form of art that's driving the Renaissance at this point is architecture. Artists are rediscovering the architectural forms of the ancient world, and as they do that, they make certain discoveries about perspective and then they bring that into art and it transforms the way they paint, the way they sculpt. But architecture is really the leading edge of what's going on in the early Renaissance.

The High Renaissance period is a 50-year

period from 1475 to 1525. This is the period of greatest achievement in the Renaissance, the period of Michelangelo, of Leonardo da Vinci, of Raphael, the greatest masters of the Renaissance. This is the period of the greatest works of the Renaissance. If you think of da Vinci's paintings, the "Mona Lisa" is unquestionably one of the two or three most famous paintings in the world: it has a whole life of its own, and legends abound about this work, and all kinds of myths associated with it. Without a doubt the greatest work of the High Renaissance is by Michelangelo, and it's really a series of works. It's the great paintings of the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican. These are the great paintings that he did on the walls and on the ceilings of that chapel in the Vatican, where he recounts the whole story from creation to last judgment that we see in scripture. Arguably, this is the single greatest work of art in the entire history of the West, and it's associated with this period of the High Renaissance.

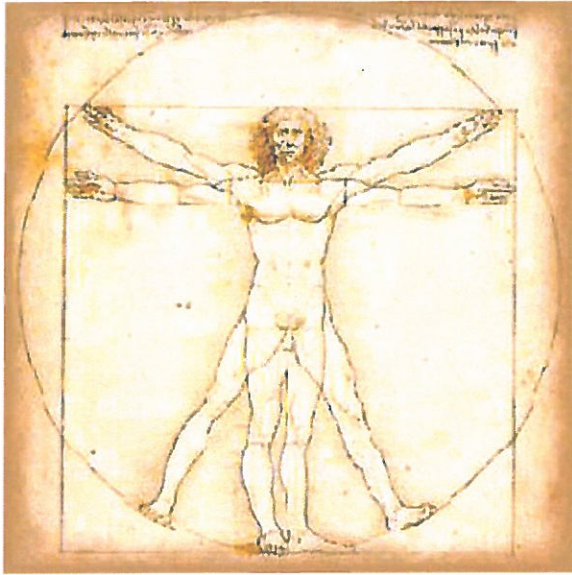
Finally, the Late Renaissance runs from roughly 1525 to 1600. It's another period of change, obviously. We see the Renaissance style becoming exaggerated as it changes into later forms. We are not going to say a whole lot about this period, certainly not at this point. Rather, our focus is going to be on the High Renaissance. Most of the works of art that we are going to analyze come from that period, from 1475 to 1525.

### Humanism and the Renaissance

Let's come back to the question of what motivated these humanists at the dawn of the modern age. What did they see as they looked past the Middle Ages, leap-frogging that age all the way back to the classical world? What did they see in the Greeks and the Romans that inspired them so much? I want to focus here on Renaissance humanism, because I think this is an important key to understanding this age, its art, all of the things that they produced, their philosophy, and so on. To do this, let's go back and see what they saw when they looked at the Greeks. What kind of humanism was modeled for them in ancient culture? What



is the formula, as I would put it, of humanism, and how do we see that in Greek and then in Renaissance life? Again, this is a key to the Renaissance. That's why I am focusing on this philosophy. I would argue that humanism has two aspects to it. It starts with something and it ends with something, and again, the Greeks are our guide here.



First, we see that humanism begins with what I would call introspection. You look inward: self-examination, self-knowledge, self-discovery, or a less flattering way to call it would be navel-gazing, but looking at yourself, fixated on yourself, looking inward, obsessed with who you are, taking yourself as the point of departure. Does that sound like the ancient Greeks? Yes, that was what they thought was the beginning of wisdom. That's why Socrates said, "Know thyself." You look inward, and you believe that the philosophical life is the life of self-knowledge and self-discovery. You can see how that's going to breed a philosophy of humanism, but you don't stop there. You begin with that, looking inward, and then you take what you find inside and you project it on the world.

Second, we see that humanism ends with projection. It begins with introspection and it ends with the projection outward of what you find inside. Protagoras said, "Man is the

measure of all things." Man is the measuring stick, the standard by which all things are gauged. You figure out who you are, you figure out what man is, and then you measure the world by that. You project that out on the world. That sounds like the Greeks, it sounds like the Renaissance, and it sounds like modern humanism too. So this is the formula of what humanism is. This is what motivated these Renaissance humanists, as we are going to see.

Well, let's look at that humanism as they defined it, and as the Renaissance gave expression to that. What I want to do is, first, to look at a literary expression of that humanism in the Renaissance and, second, to look at a visual example of that humanism. We've defined what humanism is, and we see that the Renaissance is taking its cues from the Greeks. Now let's see how they gave expression to that—first in literature and secondly in their art.

The literary example that I want to give comes from a humanist writer named Pico della Mirandola. In 1486 he wrote an essay called "*Oration on the Dignity of Man*." This falls right in the period of the High Renaissance, the greatest period of achievement. This is when Mirandola is making this famous statement of Renaissance humanism. Mirandola is imagining God speaking to His creation, Adam. Mirandola is going to put a lot of words in the mouth of God that don't belong there. He is offering a kind of humanistic commentary on the opening chapters of Genesis, and it's very revealing to see how he interprets the story of the creation of man. Here's what Mirandola's God says to Adam:

"The nature of all other beings is limited and constrained within the bounds of laws prescribed by Us. Thou, constrained by no limits, in accordance with thine own free will, in whose hands We have placed thee, shalt ordain for thyself the limits of thy nature. We have made thee neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, so that with freedom of choice and with honor, as though the maker and molder of thyself, thou mayest fashion thyself in whatever shape thou shalt prefer. Thou shalt have the power to degenerate into the lower forms of life, which are brutish. Thou shalt have the power, out of thy soul's judgment, to be reborn into the higher forms, which are divine."

God is saying to Adam: "Look around you, look at the animals. Every other creature that I've made is bound by laws that are written into those creatures." We call those laws instinct; they live according to instinct, and they live by impulse. God is saying to Adam, "You're different from that. You are not determined by your nature, not determined by your instincts, you are indeterminate." God is saying: "Adam, you can pretty much define what you want to be. The sky is the limit. I have created you; I have given you free will. I've given you the opportunity to take that and run with it." It's like the old army ads that used to be on TV said, "Be all that you can be." That's what God is saying to Adam. Take this free will and see how far you can run with it.

Well, I have got a lot of problems with that way of interpreting what God is saying to Adam but it gets worse as we move along. You know, if we just stop here, I mean it's like God is telling to Adam, "The reason why I created you is just to see what you can make of yourself, to see how far you could pull yourself up by your own bootstraps, to see how glorious a creature you could make of yourself." What a profane thing to put in the mouth of God. Scripture clearly teaches that man is made for the glory not of himself but of God, that we are to be vassals reflecting God's glory. It's not about you and me and how much we can make of our lives, and look at what we made of our lives. It's all about what God can make of us.

And certainly, as we look at the work of Christ, it's what Christ can make of us as he indwells us. You can see where this is just going wrong from the get-go here as an interpretation of Genesis. It gets worse. God tells Adam that he is the "maker and molder" of himself. It's as though God wants to see Adam turn himself into a work of art by his own effort. God gives the raw material, and we do the rest. This was a very key idea in the Renaissance. People like da Vinci and Mirandola and Michelangelo saw their lives as works of art. They saw themselves as making and molding themselves as a Renaissance man. That's what

da Vinci was doing. That's why he pursued knowledge and science; he was trying to make of his life a work of art, to be a self-made man, to give expression to what Mirandola is putting in the mouth of God here.

God finally says to Adam, "Thou shalt have the power to degenerate into the lower forms of life which are brutish. Thou shalt have the power out of thy soul's judgment"—notice this—"to be reborn into the higher forms which are divine." It is amazing to think that Mirandola would have considered himself a good Christian. He doesn't see himself as some heretic, or someone who is way off the path of truth, and yet, this is how he is interpreting what God says to Adam, "You will be reborn into the higher forms which are divine." What is so incredible about that? It's because somebody in Genesis does say that very thing to Adam, and he is not God. Who says that to Adam? The serpent does. These are the words of Satan. "Here, disregard what God said, take this fruit because God's withholding this good thing from you, take this fruit and you will be like God," the Serpent says to Adam and Eve.

And here we have got Mirandola: Does he not know what he is saying? He puts these words in the mouth of God. It's so profane, it's so blasphemous when you think of it, and this is a good introduction to the arrogance and the humanism of the Renaissance. This is how they thought. This is how they evaluated themselves. This is what they thought they could do with their lives. No thanks to God, they are going to do it on their own effort. Kind of sounds like the ancient Greeks again. You can certainly see where they are taking their cues from.

Well, we've seen a literary example of this humanism, this emphasis on man is the standard and the measuring stick of reality and all things. Let's look finally now at a visual example of this same concept, the same humanism, the very famous illustration of Michelangelo's Creation of Adam. It's the same story that Mirandola was telling us about. I am sure you recognize this very famous painting. Here, Michelangelo depicts



Adam in that split second before he becomes a living soul, and notice how he's leaning forward. There's a languid, sluggish look to him. He leans forward, he is looking towards God. God floats in on His bank of clouds, very much looking like this old man in the sky with this beard and everything—all these stereotypical ways of depicting God. He is floating in on this cloud, He is reaching out towards Adam and Adam is reaching out towards God, and as you can see, the fingers have not yet touched. It's that split second before life has breathed into him and he becomes a living soul.



But what's amazing about this beautiful artistic rendering of this, is that it's absolutely wrong on one level, the same way that Mirandola's interpretation is absolutely wrong. We see Michelangelo giving expression to this same idea of man as a self-creating being, one who participates in his own creation. Look at Adam again. He is in a sense leaning out to meet God halfway. You might say that God's drawing him, maybe you could argue that. I think that in the context of what Mirandola said, however, you have to see Adam participating in his own creation, and this is how they really saw man in the world, as the highest of God's creation. That's true, that much is biblical; but somewhere along the way they lose the sense of the fact that man is created out of clay. We are created out of dust, and we are nothing apart from God.

We are to be vessels that reflect the glory of God. We are not the subject of creation. Humanism says that. Humanism says it's all about us. The Bible says it's all about God. So you see Michelangelo giving this man-centered take on creation the same way

that Mirandola did. And we see, illustrated beautifully in the heart of Catholicism, right in the heart of the Vatican, this tribute to pagan humanism. A lot of irony right there, and we see it expressed as well in the oration of Mirandola.

Now as we pick up on this theme in the next chapter, we're going to see that the art that they created was a glorious art, like no art of any other period in all of western history, motivated by these values that are so off-base theologically. But we'll see that it's a brilliant art nonetheless.