

Why did the renaissance begin in Northern Italy?

The birth of the renaissance in Northern Italy cannot be attributed to one definite reason. However historians point to a number of important factors, which combined to influence its beginning.

By the fourteenth century much of northern Italy was extremely wealthy. It was an area active in manufacture, notably of woollen cloth, which was exported at great profit. It was also active in commerce and most importantly, trade. Florence for example, was a major trading centre. Its position just off the west coast of Italy left it close enough to sea for its trade to flourish, yet safe from pirates and corsairs. Therefore Florentine merchants were able to create substantial wealth, importing luxury goods from the Middle East. The cities of Genoa, Venice and Milan also lay on great European trade routes. Genoa dominating the western Mediterranean, Venice the east and Milan keeping contact with Germany. With this substantial wealth these cities created an economic boom, investing their money in banking. They borrowed money to other areas of Europe and even the popes of Rome to further increase their wealth. What this meant was that Northern Italy, now contained a large number of wealthy, independent cities, in close proximity to one another. This was unique to any other area of Europe.

However the Italian economy eventually began to decline. This was mostly a result of the Black Death, which struck Europe around 1338. However it is possible that such an event only helped, and not hindered the coming of the Renaissance. Firstly, a decline in the economy would have bought about fewer trading opportunities, leaving spare money available to be invested in cultural extravagance. Also the huge drops in population from around 95,000 in 1338 to 40,00 by 1427 would have left fewer citizens to inherit accumulated wealth and therefore a larger amount per capita. Often this also meant that wealth became concentrated in only a few families, rendering them extremely powerful. These families such as the Medici and the Strozzi, not interested with simply accumulating land like many other wealthy Europeans. Would go on to become major Patrons of the Renaissance.

The rich Bankers and Merchants of Northern Italy were influenced to patronise the arts, by a mixture of economic, political and religious factors. Firstly, they saw it as self-glorification. Pushing forward their political status within a city and gaining great prestige from association with high culture. An example of this can be found in the Medici family, who came to rule over Florence. Lorenzo de Medici, unofficial leader of Florence at the time, saw patronising the arts as justifying his role as republican leader. After commissioning a number of works over a twenty year period, he is quoted to have said “ I think it casts a brilliant light on our estate and it seems to me that the monies were well spent and am I very well pleased with it” It is the Medici therefore who were responsible for commissioning most of the art in Florence during the second half of the fifteenth century. It could be said that these patrons viewed the arts as an indication of status, in the same way that northern Europe perceived their armies of retainers.

Another popular reason for patronising the arts was religion. As a central part of his life Giovanni Rucellai said of his commissions “they do honour to god” The view of such works helping men get to heaven was held particularly by those who commissioned great churches, such as Santo Spirito in Florence. Other reasons included simply the pleasure that Patrons found in great spending. Although this

rejects the values of the Catholic Church, however this was glossed over possibly to the absence of the papacy. Commissions also often took the form of competitions between closely related families or different guilds within a city. An example of this can again be found in Florence where Cosimo de Medici, helped a member of a bankers guild to commission their statue at Orsanmichele. The high level of work forced the wool guild to redo theirs. This fierce level of competition would have stimulated both the patron and his future commissions.

Northern Italy also enjoyed a free intellectual and political climate, which helped the development of the Renaissance. Its area was divided into city-states; a unique condition not mirrored anywhere else in Europe. This gave each city state great independency. With no central court to dictate cultural standards they were left unhindered in their activities. This was also helped by the lack of imperial domination, due to the absence of the holy Roman Emperors whose interests lay only in Germany where they resided. Another key factor was the lack of influence from the papacy, which had been removed from Rome and settled in southern France. This led to the free intellectual climate that allowed painters and sculptors such as Leonardo and Michelangelo to question the images of biblical and stories, such as the last supper and Mary Magdalene.

The conditions of Northern Italy led to great individual pride within each city-state. This prompted not only political rivalry as found between Milan and Florence, but also further increased the competition that spurred on artists and patrons. In Florence in particular, there was a great appreciation of liberty. Leonardo Bruni commented, "Of all peoples Florentines appreciate liberty the most and are the greatest enemy of tyrants" In the 16th century Florence employed the likes of Michelangelo and Leonardo to publicise its great liberty with heroic murals and statues, such as David. The great intellectual and Political freedom of the city of Florence is a key factor in the city becoming the centre of the Renaissance. As with all Northern Italian city states the combination of civic liberty and independence enabled culture to flourish.

It can be argued that one of the most important reasons for the beginning of the Renaissance in northern Italy is their surroundings. The many artists, sculptors, thinkers and architects of the Italian Renaissance grew up surrounded by the remains of the classical world of the Romans. Ancient ruins, temples, sculptures and works of art served to remind the Italians of a golden age of learning and culture. It was buildings such as the colosseum, the arch of Constantine and the Pantheon that spurred on Renaissance architects such as Brunelleschi. By contrasting the classical remains around with the barbaric "dark ages" that followed, the people of northern Italy began to develop a desire to unearth and recreate the classical world of their ancestors. As quoted by Petrarch to "reveal the pure radiance of the past" Scholars such as Petrarch are credited with being the first to act on the notion of classical revival. Developing an interest in classical literature, Petrarch and his contemporaries searched the monastic libraries of northern Italy and southern France for the works of classical writers. They then corrected and adapted these texts that contained ideas about Politics, war, morality and public speaking and heavily influenced the importance of well-written Latin. They also idealised the views of Plato "to serve god man should push himself forward" The scholars adopted the teaching of the humanities, subjects such as Rhetoric, grammar and history were taken as the key to a civilised lifestyle and formed a central part of the Renaissance man.

The development of humanism within Italy also owed a lot to the fall of Constantinople in 1453. When the city fell many Greeks fled to Italy, bringing with

them a thousand years of learning. This exposed the Italians to the world of classical Greece and gave contact with the Greek language and ancient manuscripts.

Given the close proximity of Italian city-states, the idea of classical revival could be spread very easily throughout Northern Italy. With little intellectual and political constraints to influence them, the Italians could go about shaping their own world based on that of the classics.

Given the great number of painters, sculptors, architects and scholars we remember from the Renaissance, it is difficult to imagine how such a number of great men came to be in one area at such a short space of time. The historian Jacob Burckhardt in 1860 gave appraisal of the Italian people, singling them out as one of the main reasons for the Renaissance beginning in northern Italy. Although there must have been a great deal of talent present in Northern Italy at the time, it's possible that he formed his opinion based on the praise Renaissance artists wrote each other. It is probably inaccurate to say an explosion of Italian genius is one of the main reasons for the Italian Renaissance developing in Northern Italy. It is more likely that the ideas of the classical world spread easily through northern Italy and were heavily influential upon Renaissance figures. So the influences, ideas and talents of Renaissance figures spurred on the following generations. Examples of this would be the Influence of Brunelleschi's mathematical perspective on Masaccio's trinity. And the influence of Michelangelo and Leonardo on Raphael's painting style.

Not any one of the reasons I have discussed could have alone brought about the Renaissance in northern Italy. It was instead the ideal situation these reasons created together, which allowed the birth of such a cultural movement.