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2nd MA History
Module A Essay
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“The Renaissance Is An Important Landmark In The History Of Art, But In Other Respects It’s Significance Is Negligible.” Discuss.

The Renaissance was a very special period in the history of humankind. It is one of those periods in history where a melting pot of brilliant individuals and revolutionary ideas came together at the same time, by chance? Who knows, yet this period shows remarkable advances in our species unrivalled until the last century being even more special due to the background of the middle ages from which it came. However it is too common today to dismiss the Renaissance as purely an art based era where the likes of Raphael and Da Vinci were the only heroes. In this essay I hope to establish that this was not the case, although Art was at the forefront it was a mere cog in the grand wheel of the Renaissance. I will look not only at art but at education, innovation, politics and commerce along with its impact on the regions in which it occurred in order to ascertain a more rounded or universal view of the Renaissance period.

Firstly the arts blossomed in our period of study and their new realism, secularism and individualism all show that the Middle Ages were over and that the modern world had begun. As in today’s world Art had a significant role in society and to the modern Historian it can tell lots about the Renaissance. In particular it shows how much money is of importance to people, among other things, like the exclusive Florentine families who would use their disposable incomes to commission great art works ultimately creating the first art trade. Botticelli is one of these artists who would use symbolism in their work and he is widely renowned for his Christian and Goddess iconography.

“Artists like him used art to show current political philosophy, namely Humanism and Neo-Platonism whilst delving into the increasing trading world as shown in the work ‘Prima Vera’.” (Burke)

Not only just known in the field of painting, but also in architecture and music, this new twist in Italian culture gradually became accepted on the international scene as the norm for this age. In architecture especially we can still marvel at the wonderful sights like the Dome of Florence or St. Peter’s Basilica. Italy littered the countries of Europe with their culture and were soon taken over by the cultures of France, England and Holland who emerged due to the export of Italian ideas and scholars. Ultimately the early modern Italy observed a burgeon of new ways of depiction that contravened against earlier ways of seeing and listening.

“Anamorphous, metalepsis, dissonance, and infinite regress, among many other devices, were used to shock, disorient, and ultimately overwhelm the senses of the spectator, reader, or listener” (Synder).¹

Now I will move on to the another important part of the Renaissance, intellectualism and its rebirth. Medieval Classicalism had never been forgotten by the

¹ Anamorphic pictures may be viewed only when reflected in a cylindrical or convex mirror, or from an extreme angle; otherwise they appear as formless infant like blotches of paint. Metalepsis is a rhetorical figure that takes metaphor to an extreme by substituting metonymically one term with another one that is already a metaphor. Infinite regress may be likened to the effect created by two mirrors facing one another, in which the object represented appears as an endless chain of identical but receding images.

mass of Italian Absolute states and Romanesque ideas still remained in architecture, language and literature before the Renaissance. However this was nothing compared to the revival found in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Originating from such works such as Dante's 'Divine Comedy', Italians began to see themselves as the most natural source of resurgence of the era where they ruled the world accompanied with a persistence to resurrect classicalism.²

This revival was centred around the education and regrouping of Humanism. Whereas Atheism was morally based on what was right and wrong, Humanists used to denote Roman concept in ideal suppositions of wisdom and knowledge. By studying classic works this wisdom could be acquired. It told man to work with god and not disown him. The development of Humanism was in the huge search of documents and the teaching of Greek all of which is mainly attributed to the poet Petrarch³ and mainly known as the Carolingian Renaissance. These times, as always, were glorified in books buildings and art, such as that of Bruni and his work in assessing the day to day life of the Florentine people in 'The History of Florence'.

The Universal Man was a bi-product of the search of Humanism. He who was a Universal man would be of all the sciences. The gentry folk of the period would strive to have wisdom and become virtuous so they would be a rounded individual and in turn would become famous. As before fame was usually graced upon the deceased, the rich individuals and families wanted to show everyone that they were important; often going to the extremes of producing artworks and medals of themselves to be circulated.

"Having heard the whispers of imagination and desire from those who praised the artists and scholars they searched for their own following"
(Hale)

Under most circumstances Leonardo Da Vinci was seen as the perfect example of the universal man. He encroached in all aspects of the intellectual being. Famous for the Mona Lisa and that smile people yet ignore the way he deals with the geology of the background in that and in most of his early works, the most famous being 'Virgin of the Rocks'. His depth and vision were amazing as he delved into mathematics such as the platonic solids, exploring the underlying forms of reason. He even studied meteorology and nature while finding the time to come up with technological innovations such as his simple designs for a Helicopter. In his time he was definitely the Universal man, using his reason and experience in his work to show human emotion whether it was maternal or an expression of anger.

Here we see another significant change in this period outside of the art world; the impact of this learning upon the church. As Humanism moved north it became more concentrated on the study of the bible rather as opposed to the classical works. With the invention of the printing press in the mid fifteenth century⁴ new ideas were able to spread thousands of times more quickly and both Church and State found it much harder to control the spread of ideas after this period.

Humanism was not anti religion, humanist thinkers wanted to investigate the creation of humans, not to undermine god but understand his greater role. This led to a greater study of the bible and other related works such as the position of Platonism.

² In reference to the great age of the roman empire.

³ (1304-1374) noted as 'father of humanism', copied and distributed ancient texts. Revised Latin to ancient standards and called for unification of the Italian states under a Roman model government.

⁴ Johannes Gutenberg, Mainz, Germany. 1436 first wooden press followed by metal press in 1455. First printed book was the 42 line bible or Gutenberg's bible, took two years for completion. Soon after Gutenberg's financial investment was withdrawn and he lost his press.

The findings could easily be spread as a result of the printing press. New ideas and challenges came to the position of the church and again they were not attacking but testing religious believe. Foremost there was Petrarch and his view of just praying to the gods instead of the saints and his questioning of the power of relics. This was followed by Lorenzo Valla who argued that we were too weak to get into heaven by leading Christian lives so we should rely on divine mercy and his denouncement of the Donation of Constantine⁵.

The most prolific of all Humanist Christians was Erasmus. A reformer but not a protestant, as he never left the church, he translated the bible in it's current Latin form and undermined the church edition, not with his writings but the simple word to word translation. He and others referred back to ancient Hebrew and Arabic and found wrongdoings in the current bible which would have disastrous effects on the church in later years. The Renaissance created a melting pot of ideas. The issues of the translated bible had occurred in the past but the Renaissance brought new ideas and intelligence to the debate. The Reformation was a result of the Renaissance but not the result.

Another dimension of the Renaissance era, as before mentioned, was the effect it had on commerce in Italy and in the rest of Europe. As Charles Burney, the historian of music put it,

“All the arts seem to have been the companions, if not the produce of successful commerce...that is, like commerce, they will be found, upon enquiry, to have appeared first in Italy; then in the Hanseatic⁶ towns; next in the Netherlands”

Many other social theorists agreed with this view, particularly the Scottish. Adam Ferguson noted that the progress of fine arts had generally made a huge part in the history of prosperous nations while John Millar pointed out that Florence led the way in manufacturing as well as in the arts. In addition Adam Smith planned to write a book about the relationship between the arts and sciences and society in general in which it was very likely – as in his wealth of nations – the city states of Italy would have played a prominent part.

At as first glance the contemporary Historian would immediately dismiss the claim that in other respects, outside of art, the Renaissance contribution was negligible. Although it is obvious that the artistry of this period is exclusive and at the forefront of most people's mind, to neglect the various cultural, social and economic aspects of it is a grave mistake in the historical context. The Renaissance was the catalyst for the Reformation, which is ultimately important in revising the impact of religion and its consequences in the last few centuries. Socially it could be said that the renaissance exported the ways and means of education and provided the world with the forbearing university system. Economically, the expansion of commerce brought the beginning of modern day trading and is noted for being responsible for such endeavours as Marco Polo's expeditions and the discovery of the Americas.

Bibliography

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⁵ Donation increased Pope's power yet when analysed by Villa it was found to have been bogus; created 500 years after it should have.

⁶ A medieval association of northern European free towns, formed to promote and protect merchants' interests.