

The Renaissance – why it changed the world



Hot off the press: Gutenberg introduced the printing press to the world in 1440 CREDIT: NORTH WIND PICTURE ARCHIVES / ALAMY
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The Renaissance – that cultural, political, scientific and intellectual explosion in Europe between the 14th and 17th centuries – represents perhaps the most profoundly important period in human development since the fall of Ancient Rome.

From its origins in 14th-century Florence, the Renaissance spread across Europe – the fluidity of its ideas changing and evolving to match local cultural thinking and conditions, although always remaining true to its ideals.

It coincided with a boom in exploration, trade, marriage and diplomatic excursions... and even war. As with the Ancient Greeks and Romans (from whom the Renaissance took so much inspiration), a conquering army could bring not only a regime change but also a cultural overhaul.

The Renaissance changed the world in just about every way one could think of. It had a kind of snowball effect: each new intellectual advance paved the way for further advancements.

Italy in the 14th century was fertile ground for a cultural revolution. The Black Death had wiped out millions of people in Europe – by some estimates killing as many as one in three between 1346 and 1353.

By the simplest laws of economics, it meant that those who survived were left with proportionally greater wealth: either from fewer people inheriting more, or simply by virtue of supply and demand – with fewer workers available, wages naturally rose.

At the top of Italian society was a new breed of rulers, keen to demonstrate their wealth in a way that set them apart. Families such as the Medici of Florence looked to the Ancient Roman and Greek civilisations for inspiration – and so did those artists who relied on their patronage.

Italy was flooded with “lost” classics from the ancient world, and artists such as Leonardo da Vinci, Botticelli, Michelangelo, Raphael and Donatello took their tales, heroes and gods as a starting point to creating extraordinary art.

Renaissance art did not limit itself to simply looking pretty, however. Behind it was a new intellectual discipline: perspective was developed, light and shadow were studied, and the human anatomy was pored over – all in pursuit of a new realism and a desire to capture the beauty of the world as it really was.

If the Renaissance was about rediscovering the intellectual ambition of the Classical civilisations, it was also about pushing the boundaries of what we know – and what we could achieve.

Even as the artists were creating a bold new realism, scientists were engaged in a revolution of their own. Copernicus and Galileo had developed an unprecedented understanding of our planet’s place in the cosmos, proving that the Earth revolved around the Sun.

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Advances in chemistry led to the rise of gunpowder, while a new model of mathematics stimulated new financial trading systems and made it easier than ever to navigate across the world.

And navigate the Renaissance men did. Columbus discovered America, Ferdinand Magellan led an expedition to circumnavigate the globe.

Even as our world shrank in size and significance when placed in the context of our new understanding of the universe, so it grew in physical terms, as new continents were found, new lands colonised, new cultures discovered whose own beliefs and understandings were added to the great intellectual firestorm raging across Europe.

Radical thinkers such as the Protestant Luther and the humanist Erasmus expounded a new way of looking at the world that owed less to blind subservience to the Catholic Church and more to the possibilities inherent in the human mind.

Never before (or since) had there been such a coming together of art, science and philosophy. And never before had there been such an opportunity for it to be so widely disseminated.

The very same scientific advances that the Renaissance was developing also contributed to one of its great legacies: the printing press.

In 1440, Gutenberg introduced the printing press to the world – meaning that for the first time, books could be mass-produced. A single press could churn out 3,600 pages a day, resulting in an explosion of literature and ideas unprecedented in history.

By 1500, printing presses in Western Europe had produced more than 20 million volumes. And by 1600, that had risen to 200 million.

Luther and Erasmus became bestsellers – and later so did poets, dramatists and novelists. The new ideas of free-thinkers, mathematicians and scientists all became accessible to the masses, and art and science became, for the first time in human history, truly democratic.

The seeds of the modern world were sown and grown in the Renaissance. From circumnavigating the world to the discovery of the solar system, from the beauty of Michelangelo's *David* to the perfection of Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*, from the genius of Shakespeare to the daring of Luther and Erasmus, and via breathtaking advances in science and mathematics, man achieved new heights in this tumultuous period.

The Renaissance changed the world. You might even say it created all of what we now know as modern life.

Adapted from <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/art/london-culture/renaissance-changed-the-world/>>