

The Evolution of Renaissance Classicism

From "World History Encyclopedia"

ABC-CLIO Copyright 2011 by ABC-CLIO, LLC

The term "Renaissance classicism" refers to a fundamental attribute of the period that scholars refer to as the European Renaissance, roughly 1400–1600. Renaissance classicism was an intellectual movement that sought to mimic the literature, rhetoric, art, and philosophy of the ancient world, specifically ancient Rome. Scholars, politicians, and philosophers looked to ancient literary and artistic models for inspiration, and in turn this love of the classical world is termed classicism. The interest in the classical world was not new in the fifteenth century. In fact, there were powerful classicist themes in medieval Europe's scholarship, law, and art. However, when eighteenth- and nineteenth- century scholars sought to find the origins of their modern secular worldview, instead of pointing to the medieval classicists they pointed to the Italian (and other) classicists of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Most notable among these modern scholars was the historian Jacob Burckhardt (1818–1897). Burckhardt claimed that the model of ancient Rome sparked a more secular individualistic society in Renaissance Italy. Burckhardt's rosy view of the Renaissance generally ignored the importance of religion, the horrors of incessant warfare, and the agonies of daily life during the period. Nevertheless, his research did point to the importance of classicism in the intellectual life of the Renaissance, a point on which later scholars elaborated.

> ELEGANCES OF THE LATIN LANGUAGE

Lorenzo Valla's (1407–1457) **Elegances of the Latin Language** (1444) is a paean to the ancient Roman orators. In this section, Valla castigates the medieval period for what he believes to be a lack of learning and an ignorance of the classical world. However, his tone is positive, seeing the fifteenth century as a period of rebirth.

"Sorrow hinders and torments me, and forces me to weep as I contemplate the state which eloquence had once attained and the condition into which it has now fallen. For what lover of letters and the public good can restrain his tears when he sees eloquence now in that state in which it was so long ago when Rome was captured by the Gauls.... Students of philosophy have not possessed, nor do they possess, the works of the ancient philosophers; nor do rhetoricians have orators; nor lawyers the jurisconsults; nor teachers the known works of the ancients ... those arts which are most closely related to the liberal arts, the arts of painting, sculpture, modeling, and architecture, had degenerated for so long and so greatly and had almost died with letters themselves, ... [but] in this age they have been aroused and come to life again, so greatly increased is the number of good artists and men of letters who now flourish.

But truly, as wretched as were those former times in which no learned man was found, so much the more this our age should be congratulated, in which (if we exert ourselves a little more) I am confident that the language of Rome will shortly grow stronger than the city itself, and with it all disciplines will be restored. Therefore, because of my devotion to my native Rome and because of the importance of the matter, I shall arouse and call forth all men who are lovers of eloquence, as if from a watch tower, and give them, as they say, the signal for battle."

—Jason M. Kelly

Source

- From *The Portable Renaissance Reader*, ed. and trans. **James Bruce Ross and Mary Martin McLaughlin** (New York: **Viking**, 1953), **133-135**.

The historical impetus for Renaissance classicism resulted from the political situation of medieval Italy. In medieval northern and central Italy, long-distance trade and the accompanying growth of cities led to the establishment of independent city-states as early as the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Despite attempts by the papacy and various German rulers to assert their authority in northern and central Italy, these city-states were increasingly self-governing, involving many of the prominent citizens in civic affairs. Thus, knowledge of commercial transactions, the law, politics, and oratory became essential tools to the politically active citizen. Many families found that the emphasis on Aristotelian logic in the universities was too abstract and did not satisfy their need for a more practical education. In this context, an alternative approach to education developed: the **studia humanitatis**, or humanistic studies. Humanist scholars taught the tools of grammar and rhetoric, important skills in argument that proved useful in the political context of the city-state. While not a philosophy per se, Renaissance humanism emphasized history and moral philosophy as guides to civic action and obligations. Assuming that medieval scholarship did not provide useful examples of rhetoric or moral philosophy, humanists turned to the classics. In Cicero, Quintilian, Sallust, and Livy, humanists found their rhetorical models, their historical examples, and their moral lessons.

With their interest in the classics and with their patrons' support, humanist scholars began foraging for classical examples. They searched for lost classical texts in the monasteries and archives throughout Europe. Likewise, they began to reread texts that had been widely available for centuries. Rejecting medieval scholastic techniques, which had emphasized logic and metaphysics in the reading of the classics, the humanists approached the classics from a historical perspective and emphasized understanding them within their political and social contexts. They developed new methods of textual analysis and criticism known as philology. Philology had practical applications in Renaissance Italy, the most famous example being the Roman humanist Lorenzo Valla's (1407–1457) **Declamation on the Forged Donation of Constantine** (ca. 1440). Like other humanists, Valla recognized that classical texts were rife with errors: omissions, emendations, scribal errors, and even forgeries. Likewise, he noticed that language changed over time. The Latin of the first century BCE was significantly different from the Latin of the fourth century CE. Recognition of both of these philological premises was essential if humanists were to develop a truly classical rhetoric and grammar. However, in the political context of fifteenth-century Italy, philology had an even more significant application. With the patronage of King Alfonso of Naples, Valla applied his philological technique to a papal document titled the **Donation of Constantine**. Ostensibly, the **Donation of Constantine** was a fourth-century document in which the Roman emperor Constantine granted Pope Sylvester I political authority over Europe. With unrelenting accuracy, Valla dismantled it as a forgery by revealing anachronistic linguistic phrasings. Thus, historical criticism and philology became important elements in the humanistic education.

While Renaissance literary classicism emphasized Latin, interests extended to Greek scholarship as well. In part, this was because of the economic, religious, and political ties that western Europe had with Byzantium. The Mediterranean world fostered intellectual exchanges, which in the context of humanism encouraged some scholars to learn Greek. For example, as early as the late fourteenth century Manuel Chrysoloras, originally on a diplomatic mission from Constantinople, was teaching Greek and translating Greek texts in Italy. He became an instructor to early humanists such as Leonardo Bruni. The influence of Byzantine scholars on Renaissance classicism increased in the fifteenth century, culminating with the emigration caused by Sultan Mehmed II's capture of Constantinople in 1453. Particularly important to Renaissance classicism was the translation of the Platonic corpus into Latin. The interest in Plato led to debates over these writings' correspondence with Christian doctrines, and writers such as Marsilio Ficino made Christian glosses on Plato's dialogues. Plato's writings led some to emphasize the **vita contemplativa** (the contemplative life) over the **vita activa** (the involved life), a transformation in humanism that happened against the political background of the rise of princes and the domination of ruling families such as the Sforzas of Milan (and elsewhere) and the Medici of Florence. In Florence, for example, the Platonic Academy, sponsored by Cosimo de' Medici and presided over by Ficino in the 1460s, emphasized metaphysics and mysticism over rhetoric, what is often termed Neoplatonism.

While Renaissance classicism was primarily a literary endeavor, it also transformed the visual arts. Renaissance scholars and artists increasingly turned to the ruins of the classical world around them for new artistic models. As scholars and princes collected classical manuscripts, they also collected coins and statues, which provided artists countless models on which to base their work. The ancient Roman models inspired new aesthetic conventions, which while present in twelfth- and thirteenth-century art came to dominate the styles of the Renaissance. Classical mythology became a prime subject matter for painting and sculpture. In the early fifteenth century Filippo Brunelleschi and Donatello traveled to Rome to draw and measure the ancient ruins. Brunelleschi's studies resulted in architectural works that diverged from the medieval Gothic and integrated elements from classical architecture. Donatello imbibed the models of classical statuary, in particular the style of **contrapposto** in which the figure is presented asymmetrically, resting the weight of the body toward one foot that is turned away from the front, in order to give the statue a semblance of vitality and motion. By the 1430s the humanist Leon Battista Alberti began writing a series of three theoretical works on art. Using classical sources as inspiration, he provided one of the first outlines of Renaissance artistic classicism. At the turn of the sixteenth century, the masters Michelangelo Buonarroti, Raphael, and Leonardo da Vinci became the exemplars of High Renaissance classicism.

By the mid-fifteenth century, classicism was a powerful educational and aesthetic force in Italy. And in the international context of Renaissance Europe, countries throughout Europe came under its influence. Humanists in universities or acting as private tutors trained a generation of nobles to appreciate the artistic, literary, and philosophical works of the classical world. The humanists' success in analyzing the classics led to a broadening of their philological techniques to scripture, the law, and even natural philosophy. By the end of the sixteenth century the effects of Renaissance classicism were found in nearly every facet of European elite culture.

Bibliography

- **Barkan, Leonard. *Unearthing the Past: Archaeology and Aesthetics in the Making of Renaissance Culture*** New Haven, CT: **Yale University Press**, 1999.
- **Brucker, Gene A. *Renaissance Florence*** New York: **Wiley**, 1969.
- **Eck, Caroline van. *Classical Rhetoric and the Visual Arts in Early Modern Europe*** Cambridge: **Cambridge University Press**, 2007.
- **Godman, Peter. *From Poliziano to Machiavelli: Florentine Humanism in the High Renaissance*** Princeton, NJ: **Princeton University Press**, 1998.
- **Harris, Jonathan. *Greek Emigres in the West, 1400– 1520*** Camberley, UK: **Porphyrogenitus**, 1995.
- **Holmes, George Andrew. *The Florentine Enlightenment, 1400–50*** New York: **Pegasus**, 1969.
- **Kristeller, Paul Oskar. *Renaissance Thought: The Classic, Scholastic, and Humanist Strains*** New York: **Harper**, 1961.
- **Nauert, Charles Garfield. *Humanism and the Culture of Renaissance Europe* 2nd ed.** Cambridge: **Cambridge University Press**, 2006.
- **Rowland, Ingrid D. *The Culture of the High Renaissance: Ancients and Moderns in Sixteenth-Century Rome*** Cambridge: **Cambridge University Press**, 1998.

Jason M. Kelly

Persistent URL to the Entry:

http://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/abccliow/the_evolution_of_renaissance_classicism/0

APA

Kelly, J. (2011). The evolution of Renaissance Classicism. In A. Andrea, *World history encyclopedia*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO. Retrieved from http://ulib.iupui.edu/cgi-bin/proxy.pl?url=http%3A%2F%2Fsearch.credoreference.com%2Fcontent%2Fentry%2Fabccliow%2Fthe_evolution_of_renaissance_classicism%2F0

MLA

Kelly, Jason M. "The Evolution of Renaissance Classicism." *World History Encyclopedia*. Alfred J. Andrea. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2011. *Credo Reference*. Web. 26 Dec. 2015.

Chicago

Kelly, Jason M. 2011. "The Evolution of Renaissance Classicism". In *World History Encyclopedia*, Alfred J. Andrea. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO. http://ulib.iupui.edu/cgi-bin/proxy.pl?url=http%3A%2F%2Fsearch.credoreference.com%2Fcontent%2Fentry%2Fabccliow%2Fthe_evolution_of_renaissance_classicism%2F0

Harvard

Kelly, J (2011) The evolution of Renaissance Classicism. [Online]. In A Andrea. *World history encyclopedia*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO. Available from: http://ulib.iupui.edu/cgi-bin/proxy.pl?url=http%3A%2F%2Fsearch.credoreference.com%2Fcontent%2Fentry%2Fabccliow%2Fthe_evolution_of_renaissance_classicism%2F0 [Accessed 26 December 2015].