**Social factors that led to the Renaissance in Italy**

What caused the Renaissance? Numerous social factors encouraged and promoted the Renaissance in Italy from 1350 to 1500. The Italian Renaissance was one of the world’s greatest period in culture and the arts. It produced writers such as Machiavelli and artists such as Leonardo da Vinci. Italy's political, economic, and social transformation encouraged people to adopt a new world view that fundamentally transformed Italy. Specific aspects of Italian society promoted new values such as individualism. These social factors included ‘new rulers’, social mobility, trade, and a society that was not bound by traditional values. Above all, the increasing secularism of the times allowed people in the Renaissance to conceive a new way of living and even a new world.

**How did the Black Plague create economic opportunities?**

The Renaissance was an effort to imitate the lost world of ancient Greece and Rome. The Italian artists, writers, and thinkers who all participated in the Renaissance sought to create works that were the ancients' equal, whom they regarded as the pinnacle of civilization. The Renaissance, unlike the Middle Ages, stressed the individual, reason, beauty, and secular values. This outlook became known as Humanism and has had a profound impact on European society. The Renaissance produced great works of art and resulted in a dramatic change in the views of Europeans and a decisive move away from the world of the Middle Ages. The origins of the Renaissance were in Italy, and they were a result of the unique society and its recent history.

In the aftermath of the Black Death, Italy's economy benefited greatly from the trade, and thus some areas became industrialized, such as Florence. In this city, a large class of weavers wove cloth for home consumption and export. Italy's wealth increased because of trade, but it also changed people’s outlook, which gradually adopted a more rational approach to the world. Italian society had evolved very differently from the rest of Europe. Northern Italy, in particular, was much more urbanized than the rest of Europe. Many of the largest cities in Europe were located in Northern Europe, such as Florence and Milan. Urban societies are widely believed to be more dynamic than agrarian societies. In towns and cities, ' people come together and converse and debate. Urban societies are also more open to new ideas as immigrants and traders settled in them. The plazas and taverns of Florence and other cities were often filled with people, many outsiders discussing new ideas and exchanging copies of manuscripts. This was a milieu that was beneficial to creative and intellectual endeavors.

Because of the increasing urbanization of Italian society and the Black Death's impact, the feudal economic system collapsed. Feudalism was a political-social and economic system that gave political and military power to the landed elite and which tied the majority of the population to this elite. Feudalism was a system that demanded obedience, deference, and ordained that people should accept their position in society, without question. It endorsed a view that it advanced the belief that the world is governed by unchanging and fixed by God's laws. Feudalism was never strong in Italy, even in the High Middle Ages, and after the 1350s, it all but collapsed. The collapse of feudalism led to the release of social forces that led to the Renaissance. People were freer than ever before, and they were prepared to question and doubt and develop new ideas about society and to create new means of expression and styles of art to represent them. Italy's society in the period from 1350 to 1500 energized people and encouraged them to experiment with the arts, thought, and modes of life.

**Who became the New Elite during the Italian Renaissance?**

The great artists and the thinkers of the Renaissance needed the patronage of wealthy patrons and rulers. The unique political situation in Italy meant that the ruling class was distinct from the rest of Europe. Unlike elsewhere, they were not many hereditary rulers. Many of the rulers were often self-made men. The ‘new rulers’ in Renaissance Italy usually acquired power through war, such as the Sforza’s in Milan or by manipulating the existing political system as in the De Medici case in Florence. They were to play a crucial role in the Renaissance's development and the values that inspired it. Since they were often ruled by political conquest, they legitimated rule their rule through artists' and composers' lavish patronage. Renaissance artists such as Donatello benefitted from this system and allowed artists to work consistently. A Swiss Cultural historian in the nineteenth century argued that these new rulers saw the ‘state as a work of art.’

These new rulers also could not rely on traditional power structures to support the rule of their governments. This meant that they often adapted and changed governments' systems in the city-states to maintain and perpetuate their rule. This meant that they sought other models of government, and as a result, they came under the influence of the classical world. The new leaders employed learned men to help them in their government and for their bureaucracy. They regularly employed humanists, and in this way, humanism influenced the development of the state.

The Humanists often used their classical learning to provide solutions to current problems. This did much to promote classical learning in this period, which could have practical value and not merely academic. The ideas and the classical world's works that privileged reason and the individual became very influential, which encouraged a new world view among the educated and the literate.

**Did Individualism become celebrated during the Italian Renaissance?**

Perhaps the greatest difference between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance was the latter’s renewed interest in the individual. There were several reasons for this. Firstly, there was the example of the New Rulers. They had secured political control and often absolute power through their own initiative and depending only on their talent and will. They were living proof that a person could use innate talents and their gifts could raise themselves from a lowly station and by sheer will power change their destiny. The individual was seen as something positive and that people could change their ordained status in society, in contrast to medieval thinking.

The example of the New Rulers was particularly influential at a time of increased social mobility. Because of the collapse of the feudal system in the aftermath of the Black Death, social mobility became more common. People born poor could rise and improve their lot. Many humble traders became wealthy merchants.

This new emphasis on the individual imbued the artists, scholars, and writers of the time and represented in the works. The new focus on the individual is evident in artists' work as diverse as Michelangelo and Leonardo Da Vinci. The status of the artist increased immeasurably at this time. The new value placed on the individual and their abilities meant that the artist's role and place in society were changed. No longer are they seen as craftsmen who were often members of guilds, now they came to be regarded as talented and extraordinary individuals with a significant role in society. The modern conception of the artist owes much to the Renaissance view of the artists. The artists' new status allowed them greater freedom of expression, which allowed them to create so many timeless masterpieces.

Italy during the Renaissance was a society that was obsessed with display and spectacle. Life in the towns and cities was structured around an apparently endless round of civic and religious ceremonies and festivals. The courts of the rulers were also renowned for lavish spectacles.

The New Elites such as the De Medici used spectacles and display to assert themselves in society and to demonstrate their wealth. Wealthy members of the urban elite and the aristocracy were always keen to demonstrate their status. This need to publicize and affirm one’s status led to the patronage of great artists and writers to provide displays and exhibit the wealth and power of the elite. This need for others' recognition was vital in the Renaissance, which led to the lavish patronage of the period. This led to a great deal of competition to patronize the best artists and writers. For example, the Sforza paid De Vinci a huge sum to work for them in Milan. The need for display and ostentation benefitted humanists, artists, and writers as it allowed them to receive more commissions. It also encouraged them to be more creative and daring to produce works that would get their patrons' attention.

**What was Secularism during the Renaissance?**

Perhaps the great impact of the Papacy on Italy and beyond was on religious belief. The increasing secular outlook and policies of the Pope were viewed with disgust and outrage by many religious people, especially outside Italy. Many people in Christendom were worried that if the Pope was corrupt, was the church also corrupt, and what did this mean for their salvation.  The Church at this period needed reform, all over Europe. Successive Popes did not attempt to reform the clergy as they were too preoccupied with Italy's interests and especially in the Papal States. The lives of the Popes scandalized many and led to many becoming disenchanted with the Catholic Church. Before the Counter-Reformation, religious observance was lax, and the Inquisition found to enforce Church doctrine fell into abeyance.

The increasing secularism of the Italian elite and the emerging class of traders and bureaucrats proved decisive in the Renaissance. No longer was the world seen as a vale of tears, but it was a place where men and women could find meaning and even beauty. During the Renaissance, people were quite willing to celebrate this life and not just wait for happiness in the next life. People came to see something special and unique in human experience. In Renaissance society, the body was not seen as a source of sin, but under secular ideas, it came to be something to be celebrated and not scorned. Evidence of this is seen everywhere in the works of great artists such as Botticelli and Michelangelo, that celebrate the human form.

This increasingly secular outlook and the optimism about the human condition led to what Jacob Burckhardt has called the ‘discovery of man and the world.’ Influenced by classical ideas, many in the Renaissance became more aware of humans' potential and began to investigate the world. A new worldview emerged in Renaissance Italy, which affirmed men and women's dignity and capabilities.

**What was the impact of the Renaissance on Italy?**

The Renaissance changed the history of Italy, Europe, and the world. It first emerged in Italy, and this was no coincidence. Italian society in the period from 1350-1500 was ideally suited for the development of a new culture and view of the world. The growing wealth and urbanization of Northern Italy meant that a new culture developed to replace the old medieval order and its values. The society was one that privileged the individual and believed that life could be meaningful. The new elite in this society that appreciated display and ostentation encouraged them to patronage great artists. It was also a factor in the experimentation carried out by writers and artists who sought to impress their patrons.

Perhaps the key social factor in the development of the Renaissance in Italy was the growing secularism of society. No longer were men and women confined to a theological interpretation of the world and life but sought to find an alternative way of living in their new society. In the new environment, many sought guidance for the new society emerging in the great works of the classical past, and in their desire to emulate the past, they managed to create a new culture, one that in many ways laid the foundations for the modern world.

Important Questions:

* [What was Raphael's contibution to the Renaissance?](https://dailyhistory.org/What_was_Raphael%27s_contibution_to_the_Renaissance%3F)
* [How did Brunelleschi influence the Italian Renaissance?](https://dailyhistory.org/How_did_Brunelleschi_influence_the_Italian_Renaissance%3F)
* [How did Leonardo Da Vinci influence the Renaissance?](https://dailyhistory.org/How_did_Leonardo_Da_Vinci_influence_the_Renaissance%3F)
* [Are the travels of Marco Polo fact or fiction?](https://dailyhistory.org/Are_the_travels_of_Marco_Polo_fact_or_fiction%3F)
* [Top Ten Books on the Bubonic Plague](https://dailyhistory.org/Top_Ten_Books_on_the_Bubonic_Plague)
* [Top Ten Books on The Medici Family during the Renaissance](https://dailyhistory.org/Top_Ten_Books_on_The_Medici_Family_during_the_Renaissance)
* [How Historically Accurate Is the Medici Season 2?](https://dailyhistory.org/How_Historically_Accurate_Is_the_Medici_Season_2%3F)
* [How did Boccaccio influence the Renaissance?](https://dailyhistory.org/How_did_Boccaccio_influence_the_Renaissance%3F)
* [How did Dante influence the Renaissance?](https://dailyhistory.org/How_did_Dante_influence_the_Renaissance%3F)
* [What was the contribution of Venice to the Italian Renaissance?](https://dailyhistory.org/What_was_the_contribution_of_Venice_to_the_Italian_Renaissance%3F)