

7.10 Origin of the European Renaissance

Background: Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574), a contemporary and friend of Michelangelo, was an Italian painter, architect, and art historian. He worked in Florence and Rome under the patronage of the Medici family. Vasari was probably the first author to use the term Renaissance or rebirth (*rinascita* in Italian) to describe changes in the arts taking place in Italy during this period.

Questions

1. What happened in Tuscany to revive the art and architecture of ancient Rome?
2. What is Vasari's opinion of Greek sculpture and painting?
3. According to Vasari, why did the arts flourish in Florence?
4. In your opinion, why does Vasari begin by discussing God and nature?
5. Based on these excerpts, in your opinion, would Vasari consider the Renaissance in Italy a rebirth or something new? Explain.

Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists* (1550)

A. In 1250 Heaven took compassion on the fine minds that the Tuscan soil was producing every day, and directed them to the original forms. For although the preceding generations had before them the remains of arches, colossi, statues, pillars or carved stone columns which were left after the plunder, ruin and fire which Rome had passed through, yet they could never make use of them or derive any profit from them until the period named. Those who came after were able to distinguish the good from the bad, and abandoning the old style they began to copy the ancients with all ardor and industry.

B. Whosoever compares their works with those before them will see in them an improvement in every respect . . . In sculpture . . . after the extinction of the rude Greek manner, which was so uncouth that it was more akin to the art of quarrying than to the genius of the craftsmen – their statues being entirely without folds, or attitudes, or movement of any kind, and truly worthy to be called stone images – when design was afterwards improved by Giotto [a Florentine artist], many men also improved the figures in marble and stone. . . . In painting it is seen that the Greek manner, first through the beginning made by Cimabue, and then with the aid of Giotto, was wholly extinguished; and there arose a new one, which I would fain call the manner of Giotto, seeing that it was discovered by him and by his disciples, and then universally revered and imitated by all.

C. In Florence more than in any other place that men became perfect in all the arts, especially in painting, since in that city men are spurred by three things. The first is censure, which is uttered freely and by many, seeing that the air of that city makes men's intellects so free by nature, that they do not content themselves, like a flock of sheep, with mediocre works, but ever consider them with regard to the honor of the good and the beautiful rather than out of respect for the craftsman. The second is that, if a man wishes to live there, he must be industrious, which is naught else than to say that he must continually exercise his intelligence and his judgment, must be ready and adroit in his affairs, and, finally, must know how to make money, seeing that the territory of Florence is not so wide or abundant as to enable her to support at little cost all who live there, as can be done in countries that are rich enough. The third, which is perchance no less potent than the others, is an eager desire for glory and honor, which is generated mightily by that air in the men of all professions; and this desire, in all persons of spirit, will not let them stay content with being equal, much less inferior, to those whom they see to be men like themselves, although they may recognize them as masters nay, it forces them very often to desire their own advancement.