**Focus on Florence**

**www.learner.org**

The Renaissance was a rebirth that occurred throughout most of Europe. However, the changes that we associate with the Renaissance first occurred in the Italian city of Florence and continued to be more pervasive there than anywhere else. The city's economy and its writers, painters, architects, and philosophers all made Florence a model of Renaissance culture.

Fifteenth-century Florence was an exciting place to be. In 1425 the city had a population of 60,000 and was a self-governed, independent city-state. Twelve artist guilds that regulated the trades were the basis of Florence's commercial success. Members of the guilds, who were wealthy and held positions in government, were some of Florence's most influential people in

society and politics. Because of its strong economy and a political philosophy that was dedicated to the welfare of the city, Florence thrived. The most powerful guilds were those that represented textile workers.

Much of Florence's wealth was dependent on the manufacture or trade of cloth, primarily wool. Wool of superior quality was often purchased unfinished and untreated from England and Iberia. Florentine textile workers then cleaned, carded, spun, dyed, and wove the wool into cloth of excellent quality. They sold the finished material in Italy, northern European cities, and even in eastern countries. Other textile experts purchased inferior cloth from northern cities and refinished it to create a superior product.

Because Florence was not a port city like Venice, sea trade was not a primary source of its income. Banking, however, was. Many families of Florence, beginning in the thirteenth century, were successful bankers. The Florentine gold coin known as the florin was of such reliable purity that it was the standard coinage throughout Europe. Florentine bankers were known throughout Europe as well, for they established banking houses in other important cities such as London, Geneva, and Bruges (Belgium).

The Palazzo Vecchio, constructed in 1299, was the home of the Florentine guilds. Then, as well as today, it functioned as the seat of municipal government and the heart of Florentine culture. It was here that the city's 5,000 guild members, who had the power of the vote, gathered to discuss

and determine city issues. In addition to textile workers and bankers, the guild members included masons and builders, sculptors, lawyers, and solicitors.

**Florentine Life**

The humanist movement was strong in Florence. Cosimo de Medici, Florence's wealthiest and most influential citizen, studied the works of ancient authors and collected manuscripts of classical writings. His delight in discussing humanist issues led him to organize the Plato Academy, where intellectuals would gather to discuss ideas concerning the classics. The academy continued even after Cosimo's death.

The Florentines enjoyed many pleasurable diversions from business and intellectual life. Lorenzo de Medici, Cosimo's grandson who was known as "The Magnificent," influenced the types of entertainment held and often sponsored the activities. Mystery plays, based on the theme of the Passion (the sufferings of Jesus), were regularly staged for the enjoyment and edification of the citizens. To celebrate the feast day of Saint John, Florence's patron saint, Florentines held a horse race that ran throughout the city. And festivals held during the season before Lent--called Carnival-- were grand productions, especially in the late fifteenth century.

**Savonarola and Spiritual Concerns**

Although the humanist movement in Florence was very strong, Florentines were also concerned about their spiritual lives. Thus, amidst their prosperity, a preacher named Savonarola was able to change the thinking of many citizens. Savonarola was concerned about what he considered abuses by the church and about people's excessive interest in material goods. He preached against the accumulation of worldly possessions and called for a "bonfire of the vanities" in which people were to burn "immoral" paintings, cosmetics, and such entertainment-related items as musical instruments and playing cards.

Savonarola was successful in convincing many Florentines to return to a more spiritual way of life. However, his condemnation of church abuses of wealth led to his downfall. The Pope restricted Savonarola from preaching; when he continued to do so, he was excommunicated. Soon after, Florentines turned against him for what they saw as his role in an unfavourable political climate. He was publicly executed in 1498.

**Florentine Art and Architecture**

Florence, like many cities of the Renaissance, had been built over many years and so was home to numerous churches, public buildings, and houses constructed with Romanesque or Gothic architecture. Therefore, when a revival of classical styles became popular, new edifices in the classical style were built alongside or added to buildings of older styles.

The concept of the dome first emerged during the Renaissance in the form of an architectural marvel that tops the Santa Maria del Fiore, the cathedral of Florence. The construction of the dome marks the beginning of Renaissance architecture; the cathedral and its dome together represent early Renaissance style--one that blends old and new designs. Arnolfo di Cambio began the building in a Gothic style in 1294.

In 1418, architect Filippo Brunelleschi received a commission to build the dome. He traveled to Rome with the sculptor Donatello to study architecture; there, the two artists investigated various Roman ruins to learn about the design and proportion of buildings, as well as the construction of arches and columns. Although Brunelleschi never duplicated classical features, he borrowed ideas from the ancient ruins and incorporated them into the design of his dome.

**Art Outside and Inside**

Many Florentine structures that outwardly exemplify architecture from earlier times also house interiors, paintings, and sculptures typical of the Renaissance. An example is the church of Santa Croce. On the outside, Santa Croce is an example of Gothic architecture, but the chapel inside is Renaissance in design, due to Brunelleschi's careful use of proportions. The interior of the church of Santa Croce houses important works of Renaissance art. These include the tomb of Florentine chancellor and humanist Leonardo Bruni, created by Bernardo Rossellino, and two works by Donatello: The Annunciation and his wooden Crucifix. The Bardi Chapel, named for a family of wealthy Florentine bankers, is decorated with frescoes by Giotto that tell stories of Saint Francis.

Giotto's works are an important bridge from the late Middle Ages to the Renaissance, particularly because his characters express emotion. At the cathedral of San Marco, the upper floor contains monks' cells decorated with Angelico frescoes. Angelico's representation of the Annunciation--perhaps his best known work--is located at the top of the staircase. In it, the Virgin Mary and the angel are in an arcade, a popular Renaissance architectural structure that features a series of arches supported by columns. The tops--or capitals--that crown the columns of the arcade are classical in design. Angelico used linear perspective and a vanishing point to achieve the realistic appearance of the space.

**Michelangelo and Botticelli**

Several of the greatest artists of the age studied or worked in Florence, including Michelangelo and Botticelli. Michelangelo began to study painting in Florence with Ghirlandaio and later learned sculpture under the patronage of Lorenzo the Magnificent. It was for the Florence cathedral that

Michelangelo created his famous sculpture of David. The Renaissance aesthetic is apparent in the careful and accurate depiction of the human body and its representation as a nude. The painter Botticelli was a friend of both Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci, and the principal painter of the Medici family. His works represent Renaissance style in his use of classical subject matter and in the effect of motion that he achieves. It was for the home of a Medici that he created his two most famous works: Primavera and The Birth of Venus. In both works Botticelli uses figures from antiquity, such as the goddess Venus and the three Graces. He balances his figures in nearly symmetrical groupings, yet never loses a feeling of motion and lightness.

Renaissance style in art, exemplified in works from Florentine artists, flourished largely because of the patronage, or financial support, of wealthy citizens and the church. By purchasing numerous works of art, Renaissance men and women provided a livelihood for many painters, sculptors, and architects. It was also the Renaissance humanist desire to imitate and revive the beauty of ancient Greece, and to have that beauty surround them in their daily lives, that produced the wealth of superb art that is one of the hallmarks of Renaissance culture.

**Questions**

1. What factors contributed to the rapid developments of Renaissance values and characteristics in the city Florence?
2. What was the most powerful guild in Florence and why was trade so important to its development?
3. Why did the “Florin” become the standard coin in Europe and how would this help in developing Florence’s trade. What monetary unit might be considered to be the modern day equivalent to the Florin? Describe the impact Lorenzo de Medici – “The Magnificent” had on Florentine life.
4. How did Savonarola’s religious beliefs change the way ordinary Florentines lived their lives. Describe how Savonarola get into trouble and how did he end up?
5. What is considered to be the architectural marvel of Renaissance times?
6. Why are Giotto’s paintings considered to be an important bridge between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance?
7. What does Michelangelo’s sculpture of David tell us about Renaissance artistic values?
8. What is so unique about Botticelli’s paintings?
9. What characteristic of Florentine society made it such a special place for the growth and development of art and architecture?