

## Introduction

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IN the course of the fifteenth century Europe experienced a recovery that has seemed to many a miraculous rebirth. The century opened at a time of destitution and depression in which the very survival of western civilization appeared to be threatened. Plagues, wars, and famines ravaged a society already racked by economic dislocation, ecclesiastical corruption, and political disintegration. Europeans, however, not only succeeded in restoring order, stability, and prosperity, but they also embarked upon a series of astonishing undertakings which vastly extended their artistic, intellectual, and geographic horizons.

Indeed, some of their achievements, notably those of the Italian humanists, were so dazzling that subsequent views of the century have been distorted. Looking back from later periods, historians have tended to treat each of these accomplishments separately—the great discoveries, the commercial revolution, Italian humanism, the artistic revival, or the new monarchies—rather than treat them all as integral parts of the development of European civilization as a whole. The culmination of this approach, and

of the uncritical enthusiasm it engendered, was the work of the great nineteenth-century historian Jakob Burckhardt. (See his *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, 1860.) Europe, he asserted, underwent a cultural rebirth—a “Renaissance”—in the fifteenth century, particularly in Italy, which reawakened mankind from its long mediaeval night of religious obscurantism to resume its triumphal march toward intellectual and artistic emancipation.

More recently this formulation has come under the attack of scholars who argue that the Middle Ages were far less dark and the Renaissance far less revolutionary than Burckhardt had contended. Many of the “great innovations,” they insist, were mere modifications of mediaeval antecedents, while important mediaeval institutions and attitudes survived well into the seventeenth and even eighteenth centuries. Modern historians are learning, however, that both change and continuity can be discerned in any century and that every age is in a sense a “period of transition.” As a result, the whole concept of a “Renaissance” has come under suspicion, and some urge that it should be abandoned altogether. Others restrict the use of the term to designate styles in art and letters or simply to refer to a period of time, specifically the fifteenth century in Italy. This scholarly pruning of Burckhardt’s theories has unquestionably improved our picture of the period, but pushed to its logical conclusion of exorcising the concept of a “Renaissance” completely, it produces a misconception quite as great as that which it is intended to correct.

Ultimately the “Renaissance” cannot be eliminated, simply because a cultural rebirth was consciously experienced, nurtured, and proclaimed by a small but extraordinary elite of Italian intellectuals. These men of letters,

artists, and scholars believed they were engaged in launching a great revival of classical culture during the fifteenth century. It was they who first divided western history into three periods: ancient, mediaeval, and modern. By thus deliberately separating themselves from their immediate predecessors, whom they dismissed as "Gothic," they sought to rescue the classical tradition from the neglect and misunderstanding it had suffered during the preceding "Dark Ages." The fact that both man and nature had been distrusted, if not openly condemned, by most thinkers from St. Augustine in the fourth century to St. Bonaventura in the thirteenth, did not deter the men of the Renaissance from announcing as their goal the creation of a better world through the unlimited development of human potentiality and the uninhibited understanding and enjoyment of nature.

This essay, recounting the revival of Europe during the fifteenth century, employs the word "Renaissance" in its several current senses, depending upon the context. While it notes the spectacular accomplishments of individuals that have traditionally dominated historical accounts, it also attempts, by placing these achievements in a larger framework, to call attention to more mundane but still important matters. Thus it opens with a review of the state of European civilization at the beginning of the century and continues with an account of the regeneration of the long-stagnant economy by such factors as the growth of population, trade, and capital. Like the preceding economic depression, this revival profoundly affected the development of political and social institutions. In the urbanized West it tended to benefit both the bourgeoisie and the peasantry at the expense of the nobility, while in the East it favored the aristocrats, who began

to consolidate their domination over the rapidly multiplying agrarian population. The new centralized bureaucracies of the western monarchies were able to subdue feudal forces and subordinate local interests. In central Europe, however, where centuries of struggle gravely impaired the authority of pope and emperor, the economic recovery was not sufficiently sustained or vigorous to permit the rebuilding of strong central institutions, and towns and lords generally retained their independence. East of the Elbe, where there were few towns, the efforts of lords to reduce their peasants to serfdom went unchallenged. Beyond the eastern rim of Europe, both the Ottoman sultans and the Muscovite tsars solidified their conquests, creating sprawling despotic empires of a non-western type.

Supported and encouraged by this economic and political revival, the artists and scholars of the age set out to create a new culture from the recently recovered remains of classic civilization without realizing that they were also incorporating many remains of the very mediaeval synthesis they intended to demolish. But in spite of this and the fact that in other areas of intellectual endeavor conscious efforts to defend and shore up traditions and institutions of the fourteenth century continued, the Renaissance drive to generate vibrant new styles and ideas as well as to exercise new authority or conquer new lands eventually produced a prosperous, proud, and powerful Europe that was significantly new in its determination and ability to assert its dominion over the entire world.