CHAPTER V

Ideas and Art

WHEN the magnificent edifice of mediaeval culture began to disintegrate early in the fourteenth century, many and diverse efforts were made either to shore it up or to replace it with something new. Realists and nominalists continued to define and elaborate the basic tenets of scholasticism, while other conservatives strove to maintain the old traditions in art and letters. At the same time, innovators began to question or even to reject traditional reason in favor of mysticism, heresy, naturalism, and skepticism. Subject to the buffeting and tempering of the socioeconomic upheavals that followed the Black Death, those intellectual movements that survived had, by the opening of the fifteenth century, been reorganized around four principal traditions, each with its own geographical focus. First, the still considerable remains of scholasticism were defended in the stronghold of the Paris-Dijon-Brussels triangle; second and less important, the mystical devotio moderna had taken root in the northern Netherlands and Rhenish Germany; third and of still more limited influence, the Hussite heresy persisted in Bohemia; and fourth and ultimately most significant, the
early Renaissance was already illuminating Italy. Though each developed initially in relative isolation, increasing contacts and exchanges eventually bore fruit, during the last decade of the century, in the high Renaissance.

**Strongholds of Tradition**

Custom, unquestionably the strongest cultural force at the beginning of the fifteenth century, maintained its sway until the end; and the great royal or ducal courts, such as those of France and Burgundy, and the older universities were its principal supporters. Political centralization (the concentration of power in monarchical or princely hands) and the growth of secular bourgeois society effectively undermined the authority of the aristocracy and clergy but oddly failed to challenge their cultural hegemony to anything like the same extent. Even while his military and economic pre-eminence was waning, the feudal noble—especially outside Italy—successfully defended his privileged position against the pretensions of the burghers and consequently set the tone of society and art.

Fifteenth-century literature north of the Alps clearly illustrates the tenacity of the chivalric tradition. Even the translations of such classical authors as Livy, Cicero, and Aristotle, sponsored by French kings and princes, were really paraphrases and adaptations designed to vaunt the hardness, patriotism, and prowess of Roman "knights" as inspiring examples for contemporary warriors. Later, when the court of Burgundy superseded that of Paris as the center of chivalry, romances about knights of ancient Troy, Greece, and Rome took their place beside those about King Arthur as models for manners, education, and political action.

Assimilating mediaeval and contemporary influences
into their fanciful flight from reality, the most successful French and Burgundian poets reveled in archaic forms, mediaeval symbolism, courtly conventions, and florid rhetoric, thereby gaining the name grands rhétoriqueurs. Few writers of the period attempted to understand human psychology or to maintain any contact with daily life, but some did achieve a certain vigor and freshness: François Villon carried on the vagabond tradition, and Antoine de La Salle satirized, albeit sympathetically, the decadent chivalry he saw around him. A far greater number clung to the models of earlier generations, and the Englishmen John Lydgate and Thomas Occleve imitated the traditional elements of Chaucer rather than his innovations.

Even the introduction of printing did little at first to alter this literary trend; William Caxton, the first English printer, for example, published editions of Chaucer, devotional works, and translations of French romances. As late as the seventeenth century, Cervantes directed his satirical masterpiece Don Quixote against the long-popular chivalric romances of Spain.

Courtly traditions also dominated social forms. The elaborate ceremonial etiquette perfected by the dukes of Burgundy remained the model for emperors, kings, and princes for the next three hundred years. The ideal of courtly love, institutionalized earlier in the famous cours d’amour, became especially significant in the fifteenth century. Aristocrats set up such “courts” in order to judge delicate issues of conduct and to listen to recitations of troubadour poetry. The bourgeois counterparts of the cours d’amour, at least in the Burgundian areas, were the chambres de rhétorique, or rederijkerskamers, secular associations for the performance of miracle plays
and the composition of rhetorical works. Similarly, the creation of new orders of chivalry, such as the Garter in England, the Golden Fleece in Burgundy, and the Saint-Michel in France, as well as the periodic calls issued by popes and monarchs for crusades against the Turks, manifested the continuing, if dwindling, influence of the chivalric ideal.

At the beginning of the fifteenth century the richly ornate International Style dominated painting and sculpture in most of Europe. Growing out of the High Gothic of Burgundy and northern France, it was characterized by decorative refinement, elaborate details, and intense emotional expression. Although sculpture, used to embellish the walls of buildings, long remained subordinate to architecture, painting began to emerge from its position as a minor art used in illuminating manuscripts. With the waning of French fortunes after Agincourt, artistic leadership shifted from Paris to the Burgundian court at Dijon and to the Netherlands. With the growing prosperity of the commercial towns of Flanders, bourgeois patrons were not only increasingly able to support the arts, but did so to a degree and with a discernment still apparent from the rich heritage of altarpieces and portraits in the churches of the area and the museums of the world.

One of the early Burgundian innovators was the sculptor Claus Sluter. Working at the turn of the fifteenth century in the service of Philip the Bold, he managed to eschew his native tradition of preciosity (the ingenious use of intricate detail) for a new dramatic immediacy. Without sacrificing grandeur or a sense of spatial freedom, his sculpture still caught essential reality in the vivid delineation of feature and costume.
The two leading Netherlandish painters of the century were Jan van Eyck and Roger van der Weyden. Van Eyck held the appointment of court painter to the duke of Burgundy; Van der Weyden became the official painter of the city of Brussels. But both enjoyed commissions from wealthy bourgeois and nobles as well. Like Sluter, Jan van Eyck synthesized descriptive details within simple shapes. His luminous colors, made possible in part by new oil paints, subtly recorded light to produce effects of stylized grandeur and spatial clarity. In Van Eyck’s painting natural phenomena and everyday objects are used to provide complex references to mediaeval religious symbolism. Thus light as a symbol of divine presence shines in a burning candle or in the sun’s rays passing through a window. Roger van der Weyden achieved comparable luminosity in his paintings, but with less emphasis on the details of physical setting and more on the subtleties of emotion. He used rhythmic organization of lines and contours to define figures, suggest movement, and highlight the depiction of surfaces and materials. The contributions of Jan van Eyck and Roger van der Weyden—the creation of the illusion of space and texture as functions of light and the expressive refinement of linear rhythm—exercised a dominant influence on much European painting during the fifteenth century. Only the Italians produced independent innovations of equivalent force, and even they reflected the impact of these Netherlandish developments.

In architecture, too, change was apparent. Though the great vertical Gothic continued to dominate cathedral construction in England, a new flamboyant style began to prevail on the Continent and even to extend its influence to the private palaces and public buildings commis-
sioned by proliferating lay patrons—kings, nobles, and rich burghers. Such treasures as the town halls of the Netherlands and the residence of the French financier Jacques Coeur at Bourges exhibit the delicacy of décor that was characteristic of this new style and different from the monumental quality of earlier Gothic cathedrals and the organic simplicity of contemporaneous Italian buildings.

In the realm of learning, the universities, led by Paris, tended to remain international centers and purveyors of scholarly traditions. Their theologians continued to regard men as basically depraved, doomed by original sin to suffer the pains of purgatory if not the fires of hell. Theology still dominated the unchanged curricula, and controversies continued to rage among the disciples of Thomas Aquinas, Averroës, Duns Scotus, and William of Ockham. The scholastics had even scored what appeared to be a major triumph at the end of the fourteenth century when, following the failure of the clergy and lay rulers to resolve the papal schism, they proposed a conciliar solution. Such renowned scholars as Conrad of Gelnhausen, Henry of Langenstein, Pierre d’Ailly, and Jean de Gerson—all associated with the University of Paris—formulated a complex theory that won almost universal acceptance. Soon after the schism opened in 1378, Conrad had suggested, since canon law offered no solution for the crisis, an appeal to a power superior to the papacy and the cardinals, that is, a general council of the entire church, would be necessary. Both he and Henry of Langenstein then urged that either the king of France or some other appropriate authority convolve such an assembly; but their pleas went unheeded until, in 1391, Jean de Gerson finally persuaded the French clergy and crown to
withhold obedience and support from the contending popes. The immediate effect of this organized resistance was to produce an independent Gallican church; but Gerson and his fellow nominalist Ailly persisted in their efforts to perfect a conciliar theory.

Recognizing that the church needed reform as much as reunification, they proclaimed a revolution in ecclesiastical government. Having first denied the divine origin of the pope's *plenitude potestatis* (full authority in spiritual and secular affairs), they then advocated the substitution of a representative, constitutional government for papal absolutism. Not even the most extreme partisans of the councils proposed to dismantle the monarchical structure of the papacy; they merely wanted to subject the Pope to the superior authority of the assembled representatives of Christendom. Moreover, revolutionary as this theory was in ecclesiastical affairs, it was hardly new as a concept of orderly and responsible government. For the Europe that had developed such legislative bodies as the cortes, diets, estates, and parliaments, every major precept of conciliar theory represented sound mediaeval tradition; the schoolmen were merely applying it to a new situation. In the end, councils did end the schisms; but because they failed to reform the church, their authority and prestige declined after the middle of the century.

*Devotio Moderna*

In the fifteenth century a new intense, self-conscious piety emerged among the inhabitants of the towns of the northern Netherlands and Rhenish Germany. Of distinctly bourgeois origins and having little connection with the main stream of mediaeval tradition, the so-called
Devotio moderna exercised relatively little influence outside this restricted area until the great Reformation of the sixteenth century. If the leaders of this spiritual revival owed much to the strand of mysticism which ran like a brilliant thread through the history of Christianity, they also put their own simple stamp on the movement. In the preceding century, for example, a series of German mystics, notably Meister Eckhart, Johann Tauler, Heinrich Suso, and the sect called Friends of God (see Lerner, Age of Adversity), inspired by such writers as John Scotus Erigena, Joachim of Floris, and even St. Bonaventura, had speculated freely in alarmingly heretical directions. The devotio moderna, disparaging such abstruse intellectual efforts, held that the essence of religion—spiritual communion with God—could be achieved only after an individual had freed himself from sin and made religion an integral part of his daily life. Hence, in place of theological abstractions it emphasized piety, morality, and work.

Gerard Groote (1300–1384), the founder of the devotio, was born in the little Dutch town of Deventer and educated at Paris, Prague, and Cologne. Returning to the Netherlands, he won a popular following as a preaching deacon; but his fervent attacks on clerical worldliness prompted the hierarchy to revoke his license in 1383. As a result, he withdrew to Deventer, where, surrounded by a small group of disciples, he formed a devotional brotherhood, later to be known as the Brethren of the Common Life. Soon, similar fraterbuizen, as these semimonastic communities for men or women were called, began to form in one city after another. While the brothers and sisters of the Common Life, mostly laymen, were not bound by formal monastic vows, they lived by strict self-
imposed rules and supported their charitable and educational work largely by copying manuscripts.

As educators the Brethren excelled. Consecrating a major part of their energies to the religious training of boys, they established, or came to control, some two hundred schools scattered through the Netherlands and adjacent regions of Germany. Hostile to scholastic methods, they welcomed the new humanist learning from Italy and early utilized the printing press. In their most famous institution, the school at Deventer, the Brethren developed the most advanced curricula and pedagogy north of the Alps. The impact of their efforts on the intellectual developments of the time can be suggested by the fact that from their student body of about two thousand boys came some of the most illustrious authors of the age—including Rodolphus Agricola, Jean de Gerson, Nicholas of Cusa, Thomas à Kempis, and Desiderius Erasmus.

One branch of the Brethren regularized its status by joining the Order of Canons Regular of St. Augustine and founding its own monastery at Windesheim. In time other groups, inspired by the piety and devotion of this model, adopted the same rule, until by the end of the century, the Windesheim congregation numbered nearly a hundred houses and effected the most important monastic reforms of the century. Although some clerics opposed the devotio moderna, it was tolerated by most ecclesiastical authorities so long as its adherents eschewed heresy and violence.

One of the most famous and widely read works of Christian piety to appear in this period—The Imitation of Christ—was inspired by the devotio moderna. Probably composed by Thomas à Kempis of St. Agnes, a house
of the Windesheim congregation, the *Imitation* stresses neither dogma nor doctrine. Rather, it is a devotional work in the strictest sense, aiming to prepare the individual through purification and faith for spiritual communion with God. Arguing that this could not be achieved by intellection, Thomas emphasized morality and mystical understanding, rather than philosophical speculation: “I had rather feel compunction,” he insisted, “than know its definition.” Similarly, he advised constant inner purification, frequent reading and contemplation of Scripture, performance of good works, and regular Holy Communion as the requisites for religious fulfillment.

The *devotio moderna* inaugurated a fundamental shift in European religious orientation. Though they never broached criticism of established doctrine, its advocates nonetheless constituted a subtle threat to the church. Their concern with ethics and their propensity for ignoring philosophical speculation tended to reduce the importance of formal theology. Likewise, their preoccupation with the inner spirit and with direct individual union with God personalized piety but also laicized religion by minimizing the significance of the sacraments and the clergy. Full as it was of promise for the church, the *devotio* also carried implicit threats, which were later realized in its inspiration of leaders of both the Protestant and Catholic Reformations.

*The Hussite Movement*

To the east of Germany, in Prague, John Hus (1369–1416) initiated another great intellectual movement. Despite a tendency to violence, it resembled the *devotio* in being urban, popular, pietistic, and limited to a specific geographic region. Its origins can be traced to the efforts
of the Luxemburger kings, who were also Holy Roman emperors, to make Prague one of the cultural, as well as political, capitals of Europe. (See above, Chapter IV.) Quite inadvertently, their success fostered the development of a sense of Czech identity and an increased restiveness with German domination. In 1391 two pious citizens of Prague endowed the Bethlehem Chapel to provide sermons in the Czech language and to encourage vigilance against clerical corruption. But since the clergy in Bohemia was under German domination, such demands for church reform inevitably carried nationalist overtones, as was tragically demonstrated when, in 1402, John Hus was appointed to the pulpit.

The most famous Czech in history, Hus was already a leader among the masters at the University of Prague, where he had won his own Master of Arts degree and become a champion of realism against the nominalism favored by the German majority of the faculty. In disputations, he defended John Wycliffe’s unorthodox opinion that the church consisted of all persons predestined to salvation, but he stopped short of the Englishman’s denial of the real presence of the blood and the body in the Eucharist. Thus Hus’s doctrines, while not technically heretical, nonetheless constituted a dangerous challenge to the spirit of the established church.

In his preaching, too, he trod dangerous ground. Stirring as much opposition throughout Europe as enthusiasm in his own congregation, he called upon Christians to support neither of the rival popes; and he provoked widespread controversies by his attacks on the growing corruption and immorality of the clergy. Inveighing not merely against the abusive traffic in indulgences, Hus also began to question such common practices as tithing. He
denounced the exercise of secular power by churchmen, particularly the so-called crusades proclaimed by popes against their political opponents, and reminded the faithful that they were not bound to obey papal commands that conflicted with the law of Christ.

The radical character of his theses, the violence of his language, and his immense popularity won Hus the animosity of the ecclesiastical establishment. It was not surprising, therefore, that he should be excommunicated by the archbishop of Prague in 1409 and that this act should irreparably split the clergy in Bohemia. In a desperate effort to restore religious peace the Emperor, Sigismund, persuaded Hus to go before the newly convened Council of Constance in 1414 to defend his position. There, in spite of his imperial safe conduct, his enemies won the upper hand. Having begun by condemning Wycliffe's works and ordering his bones exhumed and cast out of consecrated ground, the assembled fathers were in no mood to deal lightly with Wycliffe's chief defender. The Council condemned Hus as a heretic and then, in accord with canon law but in violation of Sigismund's personal guarantees, ordered him turned over to the Emperor to be burned at the stake.

The resulting fury of the Hussites plunged the country into civil religious war; but their campaign against both Pope and Emperor was partially dissipated by their own internal divisions. A radical group called Taborites split from the moderate majority, provoking a bloody internal struggle. By 1436, however, the moderates had re-established control of the movement and decided to seek reconciliation with Rome. They offered to respect the Pope's supremacy in return for certain concessions, particularly the right of the laity to participate in the
Communion in "both kinds," that is, to partake of the wine as well as the bread—a practice which suggested their names: Utraquist, meaning "both," and Calixtine, from the chalice for the wine. Although the Pope agreed, the settlement proved fully satisfactory to neither side, and remained largely inoperative. The Utraquists maintained what was at best an uneasy relationship with Rome until, a century later, they chose individually between Catholicism and Lutheranism; and the remnants of the Taborites went their own way, rejecting transubstantiation, denying the existence of purgatory, condemning the veneration of relics, and electing their own priests. They were unrepentant forerunners of the Protestant Reformation, in which they would eventually merge.

By the end of the century, destructive wars, shifts in trade routes, and the transfer of imperial interest and activity to the West, reduced Prague to a provincial capital and Bohemia to a troubled backwater. But the Hussite movement had not only put both intellectual and political ideas into action, but it had also wedded two of the most potent forces in modern history. Hus had launched a heroic campaign on behalf of the liberty of individual conscience and another for the freedom of national self-expression. As a result, he had unleashed explosive forces that would carry the reformers of the next century much farther than he himself had been able, or for that matter would have been willing, to go.

New Developments in Italy

The occasional flashes of intellectual and artistic innovation in northern Europe were completely outshone by the cultural blaze in Italy. There, a small elite generated
an intense new interest in classical antiquity and initiated a brilliant new style in art. Singly, each of these achievements constituted a revolutionary technical development; combined, they created a profoundly secular vision of man that directly assaulted the whole traditional value structure based on uncompromising asceticism and defended by abstract theology, to replace it with a dynamic and potentially cataclysmic faith in man and nature that came to be known as humanism. This Renaissance mystique—though largely confined to an intellectual elite—was powerful enough not only to transform Western culture and, by extension, to reshape the world but to maintain its prestige virtually unchallenged in educated and influential circles until the twentieth century.

In spite of their revolutionary impact, however, these Renaissance men of fifteenth-century Italy had far less intention of creating something new than of reviving something old. Accordingly, they failed to follow important new paths in natural science opened by the fourteenth-century scholastics; indeed, they tended to disdain speculation altogether, priding themselves, rather, on their studied imitation of antiquity. But despite their professed intent to revive the classical tradition of pagan Greece and Rome, they interpreted their antique models in the light of their Christian heritage. This combination of mediaeval attitudes and classical models—two indisputably conservative sources—proved to be radical in fusion; and however retrospective their aims, the Italians produced a new culture.

Renaissance humanists achieved far more than a mere revival of Greek and Latin literature. Mediaeval literati, who had always enjoyed a wide acquaintance with the
classics, had, during the twelfth century, recovered a considerable number of previously lost writings, including Latin translations of a substantial part of the Aristotelian corpus. In the course of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries more and more scholars encountered these manuscripts as texts in schools and universities. Italian scholars of the quattrocento (the fifteenth century) infused their work with a new dedication to the Ciceronian ideal of humanitas: the conviction that the individual human personality, with its unique dignity, should be developed to its full potential. Further, the humanists believed, as their predecessors had not, that by pursuing the perfection of man and nature they could create a new, superior culture. Indeed, they coined the term “Middle Ages” to describe pejoratively the long period separating their era, which they regarded as a period of cultural rebirth, from the glorious past of Greece and Rome. Their program of studia humanitatis led them to develop their understanding of philology, to systematize the search for lost manuscripts, and to pursue the study of the language and the recovery of the literature of ancient Greece.

The fourteenth-century Italian scholar Francesco Petrarch (1304–1374) fathered humanism as a result of consciously undertaking to master all the Latin classics. During his reading, he found frequent references to works no longer known; he inferred that they must have been mislaid and forgotten, perhaps forever lost. But in the hope that some might still exist, even if only in a few imperfect manuscripts hidden away in recesses of monastic libraries, he left his privileged position at the rich and cultured papal court of Avignon to set out on a systematic and astonishingly successful search for missing
masterpieces. At Liège he discovered two of Cicero's speeches, and at Verona, where a copyist had recently turned up the works of Catullus, he found letters from Cicero to Atticus, Quintus, and Brutus. His enthusiasm turned to passion, and his success touched off a craze for hunting "lost" literary works as well as ancient coins, inscriptions, and objets d'art.

Petrarch inspired the Florentine Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–1375) to follow his example of collecting and studying the classics. The author of the famous Decameron uncovered works by Ovid, Martial, and Ausonius, and assisted in recovering Varro and substantial portions of the Histories and Annals of Tacitus. With the encouragement of Petrarch, Boccaccio set out to become indeed, as he believed he was, the first western European scholar to read Greek since Scotus Erigena in the ninth century.

After the deaths of Petrarch and Boccaccio, other Florentine scholars, including Coluccio Salutati, Niccolò de' Niccoli, Poggio Bracciolini, and Leonardo Bruni, carried on their work. Among Poggio's finds, which though spectacular in themselves were representative of the group, were works by Cicero and Tacitus, not to mention less spectacular texts of Quintilian, Lucretius, Ammianus Marcellinus, Petronius, and Plautus. By the middle of the fifteenth century, the major portion of retrievable Latin literature, including most of its masterpieces, had been salvaged by the humanists.

In 1396 the civic authorities of Florence persuaded Manuel Chrysoloras of Constantinople to come to their city to teach Greek. Although his presence may have kindled more enthusiasm than actual scholarship, Greek studies were to receive significant impetus from the
Council of Ferrara-Florence that met from 1437 to 1439 to plan the reunion of the eastern and western churches. The exposure of the more than five hundred Orthodox delegates, many of whom were learned scholars, to the West seems to have contributed to the increasing immigration of Byzantine intellectuals to Italy during the next decade. The result of this influx was both to stimulate interest in Greek literature and to guide its study. The émigré scholars also brought rich collections of classical manuscripts, initiating a profitable traffic in which even the papacy became involved. Thus, contrary to a once widely held view, when Constantinople fell to the Turks in 1453, much of Greek literature had already found a refuge in Italy, but even if that disaster did not precipitate the westward flight of scholars and books, it did help to complete the movement.

The revival of Greek learning renewed a long-dormant interest in Plato. One of the Greek representatives at the Council of Ferrara-Florence, Gemistus Plethon, reopened an ancient controversy by a series of lectures on the philosophical superiority of Plato to Aristotle. European scholastics immediately rallied to the defense of their “Philosopher” and the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition. Cosimo de' Medici, on the other side, provided a villa near Careggi and an endowment that enabled Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499) to spend the rest of his life translating and interpreting the works of Plato. The Villa Careggi attracted such outstanding intellects as Pico della Mirandola, the young genius who introduced the study of Hebrew to the Christian West, and Politian, the brilliant scholar and poet who drew students to Florence from as far away as England and Germany. Ficino's informal circle which became known as the Platonic Academy, served
as a prototype for the development of similar societies, first in other Italian cities and eventually throughout Europe, to disseminate the new humanistic learning that was so unwelcome in the universities. This impassioned love of Plato had an impact on philosophy and science that began to change the basic outlook of educated Europeans on aesthetics, education, history, politics, and eventually religion—thus inaugurating attitudes which still prevail today.

Humanists' efforts to understand the ancient world produced more literary scholarship than original literature. In order to use the materials they had unearthed, they elaborated philological rules and techniques, compiled grammars and lexicons, and composed guides to, and commentaries on, ancient works. They imitated classical authors in a vast outpouring of elegant, if artificial, Latin works. Their slavish efforts to assimilate their ancient models tended to retard the development of the vernacular literature that had made such a promising beginning in the fourteenth century, until interest in that literature was finally revived in the later fifteenth century and reaped the benefits of the feeling for structure, form, and style awakened by the humanists.

Prompted by their new competence in textual criticism, the humanists began to question an increasing number of the traditional assumptions and conclusions of mediæval scholarship. A particularly brilliant and important example of textual analysis was provided by Lorenzo Valla’s famous and elegant demonstration that the "Donation of Constantine," the document by which the emperor Constantine had supposedly given the western half of the Empire to the papacy, was a forgery. It is not without significance that Valla subsequently became a papal secretary and a canon of the Lateran Church.
Later Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527) applied the principles gleaned from his own analysis of Roman history entitled *Discourses on Livy* to his *History of Florence* and, in *The Prince*, to the ruthless politics of his own day. He demonstrated that the attitudes of the strong new monarchs deviated even more strikingly than their conduct from the mediaeval ideal of a Christian prince. Brushing aside the threadbare pieties that exhorted rulers to practice Christian virtue and respect the rights of their subjects, Machiavelli described and analyzed the conduct of government as he observed it. The modern state, he explained, subordinated all lesser corporations, persons, offices, and laws to its perpetual quest for greater security and power. The sovereign, he argued, whether assembly, prince, or king, judged and legislated with absolute authority. Thus, using Italian and classical models, Machiavelli brilliantly dissected the operations of the modern state, but nearly two hundred years were to elapse before others would dare confirm the accuracy of his insights or attempt to justify his doctrine of political amorality. No matter how their monarchs behaved, men were slow to alter their views on the purpose and nature of government.

Inevitably, the cult of *humanitas* produced a new outlook on life and especially on education. As the century progressed, Renaissance man, armed with borrowed classical urbanity and a historical view of his inheritance, began to turn against the mediaeval ideal of the monastic life. Rejoicing in his natural endowments and capacities, he vaunted human ambition, pride, and passion. *Virtù*, a combination of personal ability and effrontery, became his byword. Multifarious accomplishments, including a facility for taking advantage of any situation, became his highest goal. Such “universal” men as Leonardo da Vinci
and Leon Battista Alberti, each an accomplished diplomat, scientist, engineer, inventor, athlete, and artist—and, in consequence, rich and famous—became models of Renaissance men.

Art in the *quattrocento* reflected many of the same humanistic interests and attitudes. Examples of ancient art had always been accessible in Italy, and since the late thirteenth century a growing number of artists in the Tuscan towns of Pisa, Florence, and Siena had drawn inspiration from the beauty, dignity, and solid physical presence of figures in Roman sculptural remains. This trend was not merely developed but was also transmuted by the incomparable genius of Giotto. The great Florentine painted human figures of such palpable substance that observers were said to feel able to reach out and touch them. By the middle of the century, however, there was a pronounced reaction against the human ideal in art. Possibly a product of the Black Death and the subsequent socioeconomic dislocations, this new mood found expression in the rigidly hieratic, remote, and abstract two-dimensional representation of religious images. Only at the beginning of the fifteenth century did the severity of this dehumanized style yield to the courtly grace and sparkling detail of what came to be known as the International Style. An even more important development began with a group of Florentine painters who saw themselves both as followers of Giotto and as revivers of antiquity. By stressing clarity, rational organization, and harmonious proportion, they launched what was to become famous as the Renaissance style in Italian art.

Although the imitation of ancient classical models was only one, perhaps even minor, aspect of the Florentine Renaissance, certain intellectual principles believed to
derive from antiquity profoundly influenced the new art. Both Christianity and Neo-platonism taught that the bodily proportions of man, who had been created in the image of God, mirrored the perfection and harmony of the universe. The *De architectura* of Vitruvius, the only ancient treatise on tectonics to survive, interpreted the base, shaft, and capital of classical columns in terms of the human body; and Leonardo da Vinci revived the concept by sketching man’s body within, and conforming to, various geometrical figures. (See the frontispiece.) Renaissance architects made the diameter of a column the basic unit of measurement for all the dimensions of an edifice. By working with multiples or even fractions of that unit, they believed they could weld the parts of any building into an organic and harmonious whole directly related to man. Similarly, painters developed a new system for determining linear perspective comparable to the column module in architecture. This scheme, by placing the vanishing point directly opposite the spectator’s eye, makes all dimensions and distances, spatial volumes and spatial intervals, measurable in terms of the height of a man’s eye above the ground. Many fifteenth-century painters and sculptors, as well as architects, explored complex spatial relations with this rationalizing device, thus demonstrating the overriding Renaissance concern with man as the ultimate point of reference of human thought and expression.

The greatest architects of the century were Filippo Brunelleschi, Leon Battista Alberti, and Donato Bramante. Brunelleschi’s masterpiece, the cathedral of Florence, with its classic dome, not only provided a dramatic contrast to the soaring spires and perpendicular lines of the Gothic of the north but created an entirely new Renais-
sance style for Italian churches. Leon Battista Alberti, mathematician, scholar, poet, and jurist, established his great reputation as an architect with such magnificent buildings as the Rucellai palace in Florence and with the first incunabulum treatise on architecture. And Bramante, commissioned by Pope Julius II, began the rebuilding of St. Peter's Basilica in 1503. Although his designs were repeatedly altered by those who carried on the task after his death, it is his great dome that still gives the building its majestic character.

The same preoccupation with three-dimensional mass can also be seen in painting. In contrast with their northern contemporary Jan van Eyck, who made light interact with a variety of surface textures, the Florentine painters used it to evoke powerful shapes and figures and to suggest the light-diffusing atmosphere in the spatial intervals between them. From about the middle of the fifteenth century, however, as the work of Netherlandish painters became better known in Italy, Florentine studies in the use of light showed the impact of their influence.

While some were pursuing the rationalization of space perception, the sculptor Donato Donatello and the painter Masaccio were developing an analytical approach to the expressive potentialities of the human figure. Less concerned with anatomical detail than were their successors after 1450, these artists placed more emphasis on the basic structural relations, particularly the balance between weights and stresses among the main parts of the human body. The effect was both the creation of monumental rounded forms and the revelation of the shifts and adjustments of weight around the body's axis. The same emphases are evident in the generalized, structurally articulated nude figures of Masaccio's *Expulsion from Eden* and Donatello's *David*. 
An extraordinary number of distinguished artists worked in Florence during the fifteenth century—Fra Angelico, Fra Filippo Lippi, Paolo Uccello, Ghirlandaio, Sandro Botticelli, Andrea Mantegna, and Perugino, for example—though few achieved the grandeur of Masaccio or the expressive range of Donatello. Only Michelangelo Buonarroti matched these great innovators; in his work the art of the Renaissance reached its spectacular triumph. Scion of an old aristocratic family, Michelangelo poured his turbulent genius into poetry, painting, architecture, and above all, monumental sculpture. The marble of his David, Moses, and several pietàs glows with spiritual intensity. These figures, which he strove to “free” from the stone, achieve a grand but poignant humanity with their heroic pride and pathos.

Assimilation and High Renaissance

Four cultural forces—the mediaeval tradition, the devotio moderna, the Hussite heresy, and the Italian Renaissance—merged or clashed with increasing intensity as the fifteenth century drew to its close. The major humanistic influences flowed north from Italy to scholars who, by adapting the new attitudes and techniques to their own interests and needs, produced what is sometimes called “Christian humanism.” Although its religious complexion separated Christian humanism from the predominantly secular humanism of contemporary Italy, some ideas from the North made the return trip and were absorbed in the South; and similar exchanges occurred between East and West, across the Continent—from England to Bohemia and Hungary and back to Germany.

At first peripatetic scholars, professors, and students acted as the principal purveyors of these intellectual commodities. The schools recently established by the
Brethren of the Common Life and the new universities in Germany became important centers for the exchange and dissemination of ideas. Artists proved to be effective carriers of innovations in style and technique as they roamed over Europe. Church councils, diplomatic missions, and fairs provided additional opportunities for intellectuals to meet. After mid-century, however, the invention of printing revolutionized the transmission and dissemination of ideas and transformed scholarship and education as well, first by making texts readily and widely available, and second by so reducing their cost as to make them accessible to a much larger public. Movable type, developed about 1450 by Johann Gutenberg of Mainz, arrived in France in 1470, in Hungary in 1473, in England in 1475, and in Florence in 1477. Thus, by the end of the century the printed word was bringing a widening circle of Europeans together in ever closer and more significant communication.

By mid-century even French universities, among the most conservative in Europe, reflected the new influences from Italy by the introduction of humanistic Latin grammars and the importation of a few teachers of Greek. The Sorbonne actually set up a press to print the new works. Innovations, however, had a greater impact after Charles VIII invaded Italy in 1494. A genuine lover of art and literature, Charles actively supported the importation of Renaissance culture to France, setting a precedent by bringing back works of art, establishing a colony of twenty-one Italian architects and master craftsmen, and urging provincial universities to adopt the new curricula. Progress was slow, but during the last decade of the century two French humanists, Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples and Guillaume Budé, not only won great acclaim as scholars but succeeded in reorienting French intellectual
life. The critical biblical studies of the former established him as his country’s first significant reformer, while the works on Greek language and literature earned for the latter his title of “Wonder of France.”

In England, Humphrey, duke of Gloucester, himself a friend of many of the humanists, early began to collect a classical library and to send protégés to Italy to study. Gradually Italian humanists and even a few Greeks made return visits to England, but such exchanges remained sporadic during the fifteenth century. Later, William Grocyn, Thomas Linacre, and John Colet studied in Italy under the masters Politian and Ficino, much to the benefit of English humanism. A spirit akin to that of the devotio moderna moved all three theologians to apply humanism to the problems of religious understanding and reform.

The prosperous southern towns of Germany, especially Nuremberg, Augsburg, and Ulm, had long been in close commercial contact with Italy. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that they were aware of the new learning and were sending students to Italian universities. Also, recently established universities such as Basel (founded in 1460), less steeped in scholastic tradition than Paris and Oxford, were more open to the humanistic ideas and techniques they received from Italy. The best known names in German humanism are Rodolphus Agricola and Johann Reuchlin. Agricola, famous for his teaching as well as his accomplishments in music and the arts, became Germany’s “universal man,” while Reuchlin, a former student of Pico della Mirandola and a master of both Greek and Hebrew, was Germany’s outstanding reformer at the beginning of the sixteenth century. Significantly, Agricola and Reuchlin both received their early schooling from the Brethren of the Common Life at Deventer.

Indeed the new school at Deventer became the single
most important source of new ideas, not merely in the Netherlands but throughout the North. From the beginning the Brethren encouraged the critical study both of the Latin classics and the Bible, using humanist grammars and texts in their classes even though they did not fully accept the spirit of humanism until the end of the century. But so thorough was their training that one of their students, Nicholas of Cusa (1400–1464), eventually became the most celebrated intellectual in northern Europe. Though neither strictly nominalist nor realist, he speculated on the metaphysical problems that had occupied the scholastics for centuries, and at the same time applied the new techniques of critical analysis to scientific and textual problems. He blended elements of Eckhartian mysticism and the devotio moderna with Platonic concepts to form his own highly personal philosophy. Emulating the example set by Italian humanists, he searched diligently for manuscripts, finding among other things twelve plays of Plautus. As the result of a developing interest in natural science, he drew the first reasonably accurate map of central Europe and offered hypotheses about the motion of the earth and the nature of the universe that anticipated the great formulations of Copernicus. He also took an active role in church affairs, becoming first a bishop and eventually a cardinal-legate. Always an advocate of reform, he championed the conciliar movement and then supported the reinstated papacy. With widespread and varied contacts, Nicholas of Cusa was in a position to assimilate elements from all areas of Europe and to develop a broad and tolerant eclecticism.

Italy, the indisputable fountain of Renaissance art and letters, also made important contributions to the devel-
opment of a new style in taste and manners that would influence the rest of Europe. Although the old social distinctions between the nobility and the bourgeoisie had largely disappeared in Italy by the fourteenth century, the rise of such families as the Sforza, the Este, the Gonzaga, and the Montefeltro during the fifteenth initiated an aristocratic revival. The new princely courts conferred titles and patronized the arts in much the manner of the Franco-Burgundian model. Even the traditional republics like Venice, Florence, and Bologna were influenced by the new trend; and the Medici were far from being the only citizens of a republic to assume airs of nobility. Chivalry flowered once again as tales of knighthood from old court literature were revived to elaborate and illustrate the new social ideal: the perfect courtier. The specifications for this flawless knight and "universal man" were given their classic formulation by Baldassare Castiglione in his gentleman's handbook, *Il Cortegiano* (*The Courtier*), which significantly became one of the most widely read works of the Renaissance.

The generation that drew inspiration for its courtly society from the North went to the same source to renew its spiritual and religious beliefs. As a group, Italian humanists never rejected Christianity but merely eschewed traditional piety for a more secular outlook, stressing such diverse but worldly interests as literary taste and civic virtue. Toward the end of the century, however, many of them—notably Ficino and Pico—plunged into metaphysical speculation and theological argument. Influenced by Plato's emphasis on both the ethical responsibility and the mystical resources of the individual, they found much to admire and share in
the moral and devotional spirit of their northern contemporaries.

Only with this development did the new learning become meaningful to the scholars of northern Europe. Because of their religious orientation, the secular literature of antiquity had concerned them very little. Hitherto they had followed the work of their Italian colleagues mainly to acquire improved techniques for handling Latin and Greek. As the Italians finally began to deal substantively with religious texts and problems, however, they caught the eager attention of such northern scholars as Colet, Lefèvre d'Étaples, and Reuchlin, all of whom drew important inspiration from their work. The new Platonism provided the intellectual preparation that nourished the religious reformations of the following century and, at the same time, initiated the search for a truly European synthesis of philosophy, literature, art, and science.

This pattern of North-South interchange and assimilation finds a graphic reflection in the work of three artists: the Italians Leonardo da Vinci and Raphael Sanzio, and the German Albrecht Dürer. In the early part of the fifteenth century, Italian artists borrowed many innovations from their colleagues in the Netherlands, but toward 1500 the current had reversed and northerners had begun to seek new ideas in Italy. Leonardo was a pivotal figure in this exchange, profoundly influencing Raphael and Dürer, as well as his own countrymen Michelangelo and Bramante. He was working in Milan when the French took the city, and after much urging went to France, carrying his new ideas with him. He had early developed an obsessive commitment to the pursuit of artistic perfection and devoted years to the close empirical study of nature and human anatomy. An intellectual
as well as an artist, he studied optics to learn more about the principles of light and color, collected biological specimens, experimented with new pigments, dissected bodies to understand their structure, and filled volumes of notebooks with detailed sketches of what he had observed. In addition to mastering proportion and perspective, he learned to capture mood and emotion in the meticulous representation of his models. Careful attention to arrangement, posture, facial expression, gesture, and shading infused his work with a new psychological perception of human nature. The fame of his great Last Supper, for example, derives quite as much from its unsurpassed revelation of character and emotion, to which all details contribute, as from its technical perfection.

Raphael and Dürer present the fascinating contrast of a northern and a southern artist assimilating the influence of Leonardo. Though their personalities and careers differed significantly, they were both conceited, self-centered, "universal" men. Raphael, a major architect as well as a great painter, had a peculiar gift for discovering and absorbing the spirit of his time. Dürer, widely traveled and well informed, also made contact with many leaders of his profession, including Leonardo's circle in Milan, though not Leonardo himself. Although he worked in nearly every medium, Dürer attained his greatest fame with woodcuts and engravings, and like Raphael is best known for his religious subjects. In spite of superficial differences, their works have much in common. Dürer probably created the first complete fusion of northern emotion with Italian formalism; and Raphael succeeded in imbuing his religious subjects with both idealized and human qualities. Although in strikingly different ways, each man achieved a tone that escaped
the stereotypes of either mediaeval religious painting or early Renaissance realism. While Dürer's small engravings approach the heroic, Raphael's magnificent frescoes breathe the intimate. Both artists projected into their representations of man and the world a vital and compelling force derived not merely from their precise rendering of nature, but also from their penetration into the mystery of existence. Creating figures that seem to move of their own inner necessity, they depicted man as they believed him to be—the image of God.