



THE ITALIAN RENAISSANCE

Culture & Society in Italy

THIRD EDITION

Peter Burke



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For Maria Lúcia

PETER BURKE



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polity

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INTRODUCTION

THE THEME

This book is a history of the culture of the Italian Renaissance in a period (roughly 1400–1550) in which contemporaries claimed that art and literature was ‘reborn’. Paradoxical as it may seem, the Renaissance movement was a systematic attempt to go forward by going back – in other words, to break with medieval tradition by following an older model, that of the ancient Greeks and Romans.

Hundreds if not thousands of studies have been devoted to this topic. The most famous of them remains *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860) by the great Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt. Writing over a hundred and fifty years ago, Burckhardt viewed the Renaissance as a modern culture created by a modern society. Today, it looks rather more archaic. This shift in attitude is due in part to scholarly research on continuities between the Renaissance and the Middle Ages, but even more to changes in conceptions of the ‘modern’. Since 1860 the classical tradition has withered away, the tradition of representational art has been broken, and rural societies have become urban and industrial (if not post-industrial) on a scale that dwarfs fifteenth- and sixteenth-century cities and their handicrafts. Renaissance Italy now looks ‘underdeveloped’, in the sense that the majority of the population worked on the land, while many were illiterate and all of them were dependent on animate sources of power, especially horses and oxen. This perspective makes the many cultural innovations of the period even more remarkable than they seemed in Burckhardt’s time. To understand and explain these innovations, which came in the course of time to constitute a new tradition, is the aim of this book.

The perspective

The aim of the present study is to write not only a cultural history but also a social history of the Renaissance movement, and in particular to

examine the relation between culture and society.¹ Neither of the key terms is easy to define. By ‘culture’ I mean essentially attitudes and values and their expressions and embodiments in artefacts (including texts) and practices (including performances). Culture is the realm of the imaginary and the symbolic, not distinct from everyday life but underlying it. As for ‘society’, the term is shorthand for economic, social and political structures, all of which reveal themselves in the social relationships characteristic of a particular place and time.

The central argument of this book is that we cannot understand the culture of the Italians in this period if we look only at the conscious intentions of the individuals who produced the painting, sculpture, architecture, music, literature and philosophy that we continue to admire today. Understanding these individual intentions, so far as this remains possible after five hundred years – hampered as we now are not only by gaps in the evidence but also by the differences between our categories, assumptions and values and theirs – is certainly necessary, but it is not sufficient for the understanding of the movement in which these individuals participated.

There are several different reasons why this approach is not sufficient in itself. In the first place, the power of the patron limited the freedom of artists and writers. Although Botticelli, for instance, expressed his individuality so clearly in paint that it is not difficult to recognize certain works five hundred years later as by his hand, he was not an entirely free agent. As we shall see (p. 117), it is likely that the conception or ‘programme’ for the *Primavera*, for example, was not the work of the artist himself. In the case of architects in particular, the constraints of space and money as well as the wishes of the patron were (and remain) apparent. Renaissance artists generally did more or less what they were told. The constraints on them are part of their history.

Yet it would be as much a caricature to portray a Botticelli forced to produce the *Primavera* against his will as it would be to describe the idea of its coming quite spontaneously into his head one morning. Romantic notions of the spontaneous expression of individuality were not available to him. The role of painter that he played was the one defined by (or, at any rate, in) his own culture. Even outstanding individuals such as Leonardo and Michelangelo were submerged in their culture and shared, for the most part at least, the assumptions or mentalities or worldviews current in their environment (a topic discussed in detail in chapter 8). Even when individuals succeeded, as did Machiavelli and Michelangelo for example, in modifying the political or the artistic language of their time, their success was due not only to their own gifts but also to the

¹ Williams, *Culture and Society*.

needs of their contemporaries, who accepted innovations only when they felt them to be appropriate. As the French historian Lucien Febvre used to say, it is not possible to think all thoughts at all times.

Febvre's colleague Fernand Braudel went even further and asserted that we are all 'imprisoned' by our mentalities. However, there are societies, and Renaissance Italy was one of them, where alternative definitions of the artist's role – and of much else – are available. This pluralism may well have been a precondition for the other achievements of the period. In any case, Braudel's metaphor of a prison is misleading. Without social experiences and cultural traditions (most obviously, languages) it would be impossible to think or imagine anything at all.

The problem for us in the twenty-first century is that the Renaissance has become, almost as much as the Middle Ages, an alien or, at the least, a 'half-alien' culture.² The artists and writers studied in this book are becoming increasingly remote from us – or we from them. The Renaissance used to be studied as part of a 'grand narrative' of the rise of modern Western civilization, a triumphalist and elitist story that implicitly denigrated the achievements of other social groups and other cultures.³ Now that this narrative is largely rejected, along with the courses on 'Western Civilization' that were once customary in North American universities, the importance of studying the Renaissance has been called into question. On the other hand, Italian high culture of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries has lost little if any of its appeal. Indeed, that appeal now extends well beyond Europe and the Americas. The *Birth of Venus*, the *Mona Lisa* and the frescoes by Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel have never been so well known or so widely admired as they are in our age of global tourism and of the proliferation of images on television and the Internet.

What do these changes imply? The conclusion that virtually suggests itself at this point is that the Italian Renaissance should be studied from a perspective somewhat different from Burckhardt's. It should be reframed – in other words, detached from the idea of modernity – and studied in a 'decentred' fashion.⁴ The rise of new forms of culture need not be presented in terms of progress, as if building in the ancient Roman style, for example, was obviously superior to building in the Gothic or in the traditional Chinese manner. Such assumptions are unnecessary to the understanding of the movement or the appreciation of individual or group achievements in the period.

² Medcalf, 'On reading books'.

³ Bouwsma, 'The Renaissance and the drama'; Lyotard, *Condition postmoderne*.

⁴ Farago, *Reframing the Renaissance*; Warkentin and Podruchny, *Decentering the Renaissance*; Burke, 'Decentering the Renaissance'; Starn, 'Postmodern Renaissance?'

Another way of decentring the Renaissance might be to note that the movement coexisted and interacted with other movements and other cultures in a process of unending exchange (below, p. 00).

THE APPROACH

The focus of this book is on a movement rather than the individuals who took part in it, although some of them, Michelangelo for example, never let us forget their individuality. Its concern will be not only with what linguists call the 'message', a particular act of communication (a poem, a building, a painting or a madrigal) but also with the 'code', the conventions or cultural rules that limit what can be said – but without which no message is possible. The central theme of this study is the break with one code, described at the time as 'barbaric', as 'Gothic' or as part of the 'Middle Ages' (a phrase coined by Renaissance humanists), and its replacement by another code, modelled more closely on ancient Greece and Rome but containing many new elements as well. The Florentines in particular developed in this period what may be called, with an element of paradox, a tradition of innovation.

The history of the arts at this time forms part of the general history of Italy in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries – the history not only of changing attitudes and values but also, as we shall see, of economic booms and slumps, of political crises and changes in the balance of power, as well as the less dramatic and more gradual transformations of the social structure that will be discussed in detail in chapter 9 below. That the arts are related to the history of their time is obvious enough. The problem lies in specifying that relationship. My aim in this book is to avoid the weaknesses of two earlier approaches to the Renaissance, discussed in more detail in chapter 2. The first is *Geistesgeschichte* and the second is historical materialism, otherwise known as Marxism.

Geistesgeschichte, literally the 'history of spirit', was an approach to history that identified a 'spirit of the age' (*Zeitgeist*) that expressed itself in every form of activity, including the arts and above all philosophy. Historians of this persuasion, among them Jacob Burckhardt, still the greatest historian of the Renaissance, and the Dutchman Johan Huizinga, begin with ideas rather than with everyday life, stress consensus at the expense of cultural and social conflict, and assume rather vague connections between different activities. Historical materialists, on the other hand, begin with their feet on the ground of everyday life, stress conflict at the expense of consensus, and tend to assume that culture, an expression of what they call 'ideology', is determined, directly or indirectly, by the economic and social 'base'.

Despite my admiration on one side for Burckhardt and Huizinga

and on the other for certain Marxist scholars, from Walter Benjamin to Raymond Williams (whose *Culture and Society* inspired the original title of this study), this book attempts a third approach. It takes a middle position between Marxism and *Geistesgeschichte* in the sense that it is concerned with social influences on the arts, while viewing culture as much more than the expression of economic and social trends. This middle position is not unlike that of members of the French 'Annales School', notably Marc Bloch, Lucien Febvre and Fernand Braudel. My concern with the history of mentalities, in chapter 8, and with comparative history, in chapter 11, owes a good deal to their example. The discussion of the Netherlands, for instance, is an example of what Bloch called comparisons between neighbours, while that of culture and society in Japan illustrates his idea of distant comparisons.

My ideal in this book is an 'open' social history that explores connections between the arts and political, social and economic trends without assuming that the world of the imagination is determined by these trends or forces. When we try to explain the Florentine tradition of innovation, for example, it is worth bearing in mind that Florence was one of Europe's biggest cities, dominated by businessmen such as the Medici and fiercely competitive.

The open social history practised here makes use of the ideas of a number of social theorists, but without accepting any complete theoretical 'package'. Emile Durkheim's social explanations of self-consciousness and competition, for instance, Max Weber's concepts of bureaucracy and secularization, Karl Mannheim's concern with worldviews and generations, and more recently Pierre Bourdieu's interest in social distinction and symbolic capital are all relevant to the history of the Italian Renaissance.

Also helpful in understanding the Renaissance, paradoxical as this might have seemed to Burckhardt, is the work of some social and cultural anthropologists. If the culture of Renaissance Italy has become a half-alien culture, so that historians need both to acknowledge and to try to overcome cultural distance, they have something to learn from the so-called symbolic anthropologists, who try to place myths, rituals and symbols in their social setting. Hence, like other historians of the European old regime, such as Carlo Ginzburg in *Cheese and Worms* (1976) and Robert Darnton in *The Great Cat Massacre* (1984), I have drawn on the work of anthropologists from Edward Evans-Pritchard to the late Clifford Geertz. Anthropology is obviously relevant to the study of Renaissance magic and astrology, as a great, though long neglected, cultural historian, Aby Warburg, realized long ago. It has also proved useful for approaching the problem of the functions and uses of images. More generally, the example of anthropologists helps us to distance

ourselves from modern concepts such as ‘art’, ‘literature’, and even ‘the individual’, concepts that were still in the process of formation in Italy in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and that did not have quite the same meanings that they have today.⁵

Within anthropology, particularly relevant to the questions discussed in this book is the work of the ‘ethnolinguists’ or the ‘ethnographers of communication’. The main concern of Dell Hymes and other members of this group, like that of sociologists of language such as Joshua Fishman, is to study who is saying what to whom, in what situations and through what channels and codes.⁶ ‘Saying’ includes not only speaking and writing but a much wider range of ‘communicative events’ such as rituals, events that between them both express and constitute a culture. The relevance of this approach to a book like this, concerned as it is with the messages of paintings, plays and poems at a time when the Gothic ‘code’ or style was replaced by another one (at once newer and older), will be obvious enough.

The plan

The idea that the material base of society affects the arts pervasively but indirectly is expressed in this study by the order of the chapters, working outwards from a centre. The centre is what we now call the art, humanism, literature and music of Renaissance Italy, and it is briefly described in the first chapter. That chapter poses the basic problems that the rest of the book will address: Why did the arts take these particular forms at this place and time? Chapter 2 offers an account of the various solutions propounded, from the painter-historian Giorgio Vasari, already aware of the need to explain recent artistic achievements, to our own time.

The second part of the book is concerned with the immediate social environment of the arts. In the first place, in chapter 3, with the kinds of people who produced the paintings, statues, buildings, poems, and so on, that we admire so much today. Six hundred of the best-known artists and writers are studied in particular detail. Secondly, in chapter 4, with the kinds of people for whom this ‘creative elite’ produced their artefacts and performances, and what the patrons expected for their money. Widening out, chapters 5 and 6 examine the social uses of what we call ‘works of art’ and the responses of contemporary viewers and listeners – in other words, the taste of the time. These chapters present cultural and social level at the micro-level.

Some scholars, among them E. H. Gombrich, have argued that the

⁵ Burke, ‘Anthropology of the Renaissance’.

⁶ Hymes, *Foundations in Sociolinguistics*; Fishman, ‘Who speaks what language’.

social history of the arts should stop at this point, but I believe that to do this is to leave the job half done.⁷ Hence the third and last section of the book widens out still further. A description of contemporary standards of taste does not make full sense if it is not inserted into the dominant worldview of the time, described in chapter 7. Again, social groups such as artists and patrons need to be situated in the whole social framework (chapter 8) if we are to understand their ideals, intentions or demands. A final problem is that of the relation between cultural and social change. Every chapter discusses specific changes, but chapters 9 and 10 attempt to draw these different threads together and to illuminate developments in Italy by means of comparisons and contrasts, first with the Netherlands in the same period and then with a culture more remote in both space and time – Japan in its famous ‘Genroku era’.

Quantitative methods

One major feature of this study, and still a controversial one, is its use of quantitative methods. The discussion of the changing subject matter of paintings, for instance, is based on a sample of some 2,000 dated paintings and illustrates what the French call *histoire sérielle*, the analysis of a time-series. Again, the chapter on artists and writers is based on the analysis of six hundred careers. The original analysis, made in the 1960s, was facilitated by a computer, an ICT 1900, that must by now be regarded as an antique. This method of collective biography or ‘prosopography’ has been followed in some later studies of Renaissance Italy.⁸ On the other hand, my use of statistics was described by one of the first reviewers as ‘pseudoscience’. This reaction suggests that a few words of clarification are needed, making at least two points.

The first point is that historians make implicitly quantitative statements whenever they use terms such as ‘more’ or ‘less’, ‘rise’ or ‘decline’, terms without which they would find their task of discussing change to be extremely difficult. Quantitative statements require quantitative evidence. A common criticism of quantitative methods is that they tell us only what we already know. They do indeed often confirm earlier conclusions but, like the discovery of new evidence, they also put these conclusions on a firmer base.

The second point concerns precision. The statistics are speciously precise because the exact relation of the sample analysed to the world outside it is less than certain. Hence it is useless, and indeed misleading,

⁷ Gombrich, *In Search of Cultural History*.

⁸ Bec, ‘Statuto socio-professionale’; De Caprio, ‘Aristocrazia e clero’; King, *Venetian Humanism*.

in this historical field at least, to offer figures as precise as '7.25 per cent', and so I have deliberately dealt in round numbers. All the same, the calculation of rough absolute figures is probably the least unreliable means of assessing relative magnitudes and the extent of changes, which are the true objects of the exercise.

A REVISED EDITION

I was invited to write this book in 1964 by John Hale, a leading figure in Renaissance studies. The moment was a good one for me, since I had recently been appointed Assistant Lecturer at the new University of Sussex, where I was teaching a course on 'Culture and Society' and another on Jacob Burckhardt. Invading the field of art history was a daunting prospect, but my entry was facilitated by a few months at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton in 1967, allowing fruitful conversations with Millard Meiss, James Beck and Julius Held.

A great deal has happened in, or to, art history since that time, as it has to 'plain' or general history. The social history of art, once regarded by the majority of art historians as marginal or even (given its Marxist past) as subversive, has moved closer to the centre of the discipline. Studies of art patronage in particular, in the Renaissance as in other periods, have proliferated.⁹ The history of collecting has attracted increasing interest from the 1980s onwards, an interest reflected in the conferences and journals devoted to this subject. In Renaissance Italy, for example, humanists such as Poggio Bracciolini, painters such as Neroccio de' Landi, aristocrats such as Isabella d'Este and even popes such as Paul II (formerly Pietro Barbo) collected classical statues, coins, cameos and, in the case of the humanist bishop Paolo Giovio, the portraits of famous people.¹⁰ Many collectors loved the objects that they collected, but, like other forms of conspicuous consumption, collecting became a fashion and allowed individuals to maintain or improve their social status by distinguishing themselves from ordinary people in this way. Artists might portray members of the elite against a background that included favourite objects from their collections, as in the case of Bronzino's Ugolino Martelli (Plate 4.5).¹¹

In the 1960s, I felt somewhat isolated in my attempt to invade the ter-

⁹ Kempers, *Painting, Power and Patronage*; Kent and Simons, *Patronage, Art and Society*; Hollingsworth, *Patronage in Renaissance Italy*; Kent, *Cosimo de' Medici*; Burke, *Changing Patrons*, etc.

¹⁰ Pomian, *Collectors and Curiosities*; Elsner and Cardinal, *Cultures of Collecting*; Findlen, 'Possessing the past'; Salomon, 'Cardinal Pietro Barbo's collection'; Michelacci, *Giovio in Parnasso*.

¹¹ Bourdieu, *Distinction*; Burke, *Historical Anthropology*, ch. 10; Urquizar Herrera, *Coleccionismo y nobleza*.

ritory of art historians. Today, however, some art historians are invading the territory of 'plain' or general historians, writing about the family or about shopping in the Renaissance, and in the process making more use and more effective use of the evidence of images than their plain colleagues.¹² The idea of art history has been challenged from within the discipline by partisans of what is commonly called 'visual culture'.

Plain history has changed as well. In Renaissance studies, three movements are particularly visible. We might call them the feminine, domestic and global turns.

The feminine turn

The feminine turn is linked to the rise of women's history in the 1970s, a part of the wider feminist movement. It was in that decade that the art historian Linda Nochlin asked in print, 'Why have there been no great women artists?', while the historian Joan Kelly followed this question with another, 'Did women have a Renaissance?', and the feminist Germaine Greer wrote a study of female artists under the title *The Obstacle Race*.¹³ The search for female artists in Renaissance Italy did not produce substantial results (below, p. 48). Female writers were another matter: indeed, some of them had been well known for a long time, though they now attracted more interest. Increasing attention was also paid to a number of learned ladies whose place in the history of humanism had hitherto been marginal: Isotta Nogarola of Verona, for instance (below, p. 49).¹⁴ Studies on the position of women in the Renaissance and on 'Renaissance feminism' multiplied.¹⁵

Since the obstacles in the way of women entering the creative elite were so numerous, scholars turned their attention to other ways in which women had made contributions to the arts, either directly as patrons or indirectly as supporters or stimulators – what the French call *animateurs*. Studies of women in Renaissance Italy who commissioned paintings, statues and buildings have proliferated.¹⁶ Studies of the patronage of

¹² Brown, *Private Lives*; Welch, *Shopping in the Renaissance*.

¹³ Nochlin, 'Why have there been?'; Kelly, 'Did women have a Renaissance?'; Greer, *Obstacle Race*.

¹⁴ Pesenti, 'Alessandra Scala'; King, 'Thwarted ambitions'; Labalme, *Beyond their Sex*; Jardine, 'Isotta Nogarola' and 'Myth of the learned lady'.

¹⁵ Jordan, *Renaissance Feminism*; Migiel and Schiesari, *Refiguring Woman*; Niccoli, *Rinascimento al femminile*; Panizza, *Women in Italian Renaissance*.

¹⁶ King, *Renaissance Women Patrons*; Matthews-Greco and Zarri, 'Committenza artistica femminile'; Welch, 'Women as patrons'; Reiss and Wilkins, *Beyond Isabella*; McIver, *Women, Art and Architecture*; Roberts, *Dominican Women*; Solum, 'Problem of female patronage'.

Isabella d'Este, marchioness of Mantua, now fill half a shelf by themselves.¹⁷ Other women acted as patrons at one remove, recommending artists and writers to male relatives.¹⁸ The court of Urbino, the setting for Castiglione's famous dialogue on the courtier, has been studied from a feminist or, at any rate, from a female point of view, noting that, owing to the illness of Duke Guidobaldo, the court was dominated by the duchess, Elisabetta Gonzaga, and that women play a discreet but important role in the dialogue.¹⁹

These studies are part of a much broader trend towards making women visible in history, in the economy and in politics as well as in culture, a trend in which historians of Italy have participated.²⁰ Interest in the cultural role of women has also encouraged what might be called the 'domestic turn' in Renaissance studies.

The domestic turn

The domestic turn includes a concern with private life, with the everyday world of families, but it is most visible in the field of material culture.²¹ A major shift of interest in Renaissance studies since this book was first published in 1972 has been the rise of interest in and the revaluation of the decorative or 'applied' arts and their settings, especially the domestic interior. An earlier phase of interest was associated with the Arts and Crafts movement in Britain and its equivalents elsewhere and led to a few studies of the Renaissance from this point of view.²² The current shift or turn forms part of broader historical trends, notably the rise of interest in both private life and material culture.²³

At this juncture, it was possible for British scholars to obtain grants from the Arts and Humanities Research Board for two collective research projects, one on the 'Material Renaissance' and the other on the 'Domestic Interior' (including Italian interiors of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries), while the Victoria and Albert Museum mounted an exhibition in 2006–7 entitled 'At Home in Renaissance Italy'. Scholars in Italy, the United States and France have also made important contri-

¹⁷ Braghirolli, 'Carteggio di Isabella d'Este'; Cartwright, *Isabella d'Este*; Fletcher, 'Isabella d'Este'; Brown, 'Ferrarese lady'; Campbell, *Cabinet of Eros*; Ames-Lewis, *Isabella and Leonardo*.

¹⁸ Regan, 'Ariosto's threshold patron'.

¹⁹ Zancan, 'Donna e il cerchio'; Finucci, 'Donna di corte'.

²⁰ For example, Brown and Davis, *Gender and Society*; Muir, 'In some neighbours we trust'.

²¹ Brown, *Private Lives*; Musacchio, *Art, Marriage and Family*.

²² Schiaparelli, *Casa fiorentina*; Schubring, *Cassoni*.

²³ Findlen, 'Possessing the past'; O'Malley and Welch, *Material Renaissance*.

butions to the turn from the 1980s to the present. Female scholars are prominent in this new field and so are museum curators. Participants in the turn have produced an important body of work on the interiors of houses, especially the urban palaces of the upper classes, as a setting for display.²⁴

Other scholars have focused attention on the different kinds of object to be found in houses, such as chairs, beds, tapestries, carpets, plates, dishes, mirrors, goblets and inkwells. They were often designed and decorated with care and skill, as in the case of the bronze inkstands by Andrea Riccio, which have become objects of interest alongside the texts written with their aid. Bronze statuettes, sometimes copies of larger works in marble, displayed the owner's taste and interest in antiquity.²⁵ Beautiful domestic objects were displayed in reception rooms, studies and bedrooms (which were sometimes open to visitors) and attracted the interest of contemporary connoisseurs such as Lorenzo de' Medici and Isabella d'Este. Botticelli's *Primavera*, for instance, was originally hung in a bedroom.²⁶ Historians have also examined the family rituals associated with some of these items, with the *cassone* (a chest for the trousseau), for example, or the birth tray (bring refreshments to a woman in childbirth, and later displayed on the wall), and with the values embedded in them.²⁷ Chests and birth trays alike were sometimes decorated with elaborate scenes of love and marriage.

This new wave of research has not only helped to bring Renaissance Italy closer to us but also encouraged a reevaluation of what we perhaps too easily call its 'works of art', reproducing a distinction between 'fine art' (or, in French, *beaux-arts*), considered to be superior, and 'decorative arts', treated as inferior. The distinction was clear enough in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but it may be argued that, in the case of Renaissance Italy, it is anachronistic.²⁸ The same painters might be employed painting what we call 'easel pictures' one day and birth trays the next. More exactly, it may be suggested that the distinction between fine and decorative art was emerging in Italy in the course of the period discussed in this book, a suggestion supported by Vasari's remark

²⁴ Lydecker, *Domestic Setting*; Goldthwaite, 'Empire of things'; Thornton, *Italian Renaissance Interior*; Thornton, *Scholar in his Study*; Ajmar-Wollheim and Dennis, *At Home*; Currie, *Inside the Renaissance House*; Lindow, *Renaissance Palace*; Palumbo Fossati Casa, *Intérieurs vénitiens*.

²⁵ Radcliffe and Penny, *Art of the Renaissance Bronze*; Warren, 'Bronzes'.

²⁶ Smith, 'On the original location'; Syson and Thornton, *Objects of Virtue*; Ago, *Gusto for Things*; Motture and O'Malley, 'Introduction'.

²⁷ Klapisch-Zuber, *Women, Family and Ritual*; Baskins, *Cassone Painting*; Musacchio, *Ritual of Childbirth*; Randolph, 'Gendering the period eye'.

²⁸ Guerzoni, *Apollo and Vulcan*.

that, in the fifteenth century, ‘even the most excellent painters’ decorated chests ‘without being ashamed, as many would be today’ (below, p. 000). However, even during the ‘High Renaissance’ of the early sixteenth century, a painter as famous in his own time as Raphael designed metalwork and tapestries.²⁹

The global turn

Today, the rise of global history makes the Renaissance appear smaller than it used to do, thus ‘provincializing Europe’, in Dipesh Chakrabarty’s memorable phrase.³⁰ Like Arnold Toynbee in the 1950s, some scholars now speak of ‘renaissances’ in the plural, using the term to refer to a family of movements of revival.³¹ A whole series of both Byzantine and Islamic renaissances have been identified. In architecture, for instance, the late classical tradition exemplified in the church of Santa Sophia was followed in many respects in the Ottoman Empire, successor to the Byzantine Empire, in a series of mosques built in Istanbul, Edirne and elsewhere. Turning to renaissances of non-classical traditions, one thinks of the Confucian revival in the age of Zhu Xi in what Westerners call the twelfth century. Just as Pico and Ficino are known as ‘neo-Platonist’ philosophers, Zhu Xi is generally described as a ‘neo-Confucian’.

The Italian Renaissance may still be regarded as ‘the Big One’ in two senses: in the sense that it was unusually protracted (lasting for some three hundred years) and also in the sense that it was unusually influential, with a posthumous career of another three hundred and fifty years.³² However, what the movement owes to cultures other than ancient Greece and Rome and the medieval West deserves attention.³³ Some of these debts to other cultures have long been recognized, notably what was owed to the learned culture of Byzantium and (in the natural sciences at least) to that of the Islamic world.³⁴ Aby Warburg discovered an Indian astrological image in the Renaissance frescoes in Palazzo Schifanoia in Ferrara, an image transmitted to Italy via the Arab scholar Abu Ma’asar, known in the West as ‘Albumazar’.³⁵ On the other hand, the contribution of Jewish scholars to the Renaissance, notably to the revival of Hebrew

²⁹ Syson and Thornton, *Objects of Virtue*, p. 160.

³⁰ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*.

³¹ Toynbee, *Study of History*, Goody, *Renaissances*.

³² Burke, ‘Jack Goody and the comparative history’.

³³ Burke, ‘Renaissance Europe and the world’.

³⁴ Kristeller, ‘Italian humanism and Byzantium’; Geanakoplos, *Interaction*; Gutas, *Greek Thought*.

³⁵ Warburg, *Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*, pp. 563–92.

studies, for example the ways in which the Renaissance affected communities of Jews in Italy, has been studied only relatively recently.³⁶

Turning to material culture, objects from the world beyond Europe were appreciated in Renaissance Italy. Lorenzo de' Medici received a piece of Chinese porcelain as a present in 1487, while some blue and white Chinese bowls are recognizable in Giovanni Bellini's *Feast of the Gods*. By the sixteenth century, Genoese craftsmen were producing imitations of Ming porcelain. Grand Duke Cosimo de' Medici owned objects from Africa such as forks, spoons, salt-cellars and ivory horns made in what is now known as an 'Afro-Portuguese' style. As for the New World, Mexican artefacts ranging from mosaic masks to pictographic codices circulated in the circle of the Medici.³⁷

However, the culture from which both artists and humanists appropriated the most was the Islamic world. Venetian merchants lived in Cairo, Damascus and Istanbul, while some visited Persia and India. Some artists also travelled eastwards, among them Gentile Bellini.³⁸ Conversely, the Muslim geographer al-Hasan ibn Muhammad al-Wazzan, better known in the West as Leo Africanus, lived for some time in Rome and wrote his description of Africa there.³⁹ In the case of literature, there is a remarkable parallel between the lyrics of Petrarch and his followers and Arab *ghazals*, evoking the sweet pain of love, the cruelty of the beloved, and so on, a tradition that was transmitted to Petrarch via Sicily or the troubadours of Provence, who were in touch with Muslim Spain.⁴⁰

Among the Italian humanists, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola was particularly open to ideas from different cultures. In his famous oration on the dignity of humanity, Pico quoted a remark by 'Abdala the Saracen', as he called the scholar best known as 'Abd Allah Ibn Qutayba, to the effect that that nothing is more wonderful than man.⁴¹ The commentary on Aristotle's *Poetics* by the Muslim humanist Ibn Rushd ('Averroes') was published in Latin translation in Venice in 1481, while the physician Ibn Sina ('Avicenna') was studied in Italian universities in the Renaissance as he had been in the later Middle Ages.⁴² It was recently argued that Filippo Brunelleschi was in debt, for his famous discovery

³⁶ Bonfil, 'Historian's perception' and *Rabbis and Jewish Communities*; Tirosh-Rothschild, 'Jewish culture'.

³⁷ Heikamp, *Mexico and the Medici*.

³⁸ Raby, *Venice*; Brotton, *Renaissance Bazaar*; Howard, 'Status of the oriental traveller'.

³⁹ Zhiri, *Afrique au miroir*; Davis, *Trickster Travels*.

⁴⁰ Gabrieli, *Testimonianze*, p. 47; Menocal, *Arabic Role*, pp. xi, 63, 117–18.

⁴¹ Makdisi, *Rise of Humanism*, p. 307.

⁴² Siraisi, *Avicenna in Renaissance Italy*.

of the laws of perspective, to the writings of another medieval Muslim scholar, Ibn al-Haytham ('Alhazen').⁴³

In the case of architecture, it is clear that the famous fifteenth-century hospitals of Florence and Milan followed the design of hospitals in Damascus and Cairo. It has also been suggested that Piazza San Marco was inspired by the courtyard of the Great Mosque at Damascus, while the Doge's Palace drew on Mamluk architecture.⁴⁴ Again, the façade of the palace of Ca' Zen in Venice, built between 1533 and 1553, includes oriental arches, doubtless an allusion to the economic and political involvement of the Zen family in the affairs of the Middle East.⁴⁵

The fashion for collecting Turkish objects, such as carpets from Anatolia and ceramics from Iznik, reveals that the Ottoman world was a source of attraction as well as anxiety at this time. Indeed, some Venetian craftsmen produced imitations of Turkish products such as leather shields.⁴⁶ Perhaps the biggest debt of Renaissance artists to Islamic culture was to the repertoire of decorative motifs that we still describe as 'arabesques', employed in printed ornaments, book-bindings, metalwork and elsewhere. These arabesques became fashionable in Venice around the year 1500, but the designs soon spread more widely. Cellini, for instance, attempted to emulate the decoration on Turkish daggers.⁴⁷ It is possible that Western culture had been more open to exotic influences in the Middle Ages than it became in the Renaissance, especially the 'High' Renaissance of the early sixteenth century, in which humanists and artists were impressed by the rules for good writing and good building formulated by the ancient Romans Cicero and Vitruvius. In the less dignified domain of the decorative arts, however, the obstacles to eclecticism were less powerful.

The challenge of a new edition is to take account of new research by hundreds of scholars and to offer readers a synthesis despite the centrifugal tendencies of research on this large topic. After more than forty years, two changes of name and much revision, the book is beginning to resemble the famous ship of the Argonauts, in which one plank after another was replaced in the course of a long voyage. Whether or not *The Italian Renaissance* remains the same book, I am very happy that Polity has decided to launch it once again.

Cambridge, February 2013

⁴³ Belting, *Florence and Baghdad*.

⁴⁴ Quadflieg, *Filaretos Ospedale maggiore in Mailand*; Howard, *Venice and the East*, pp. 104, 120, 178.

⁴⁵ Concina, *Dell'arabico*.

⁴⁶ Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza*; Contadini, 'Middle Eastern objects'.

⁴⁷ Morison, *Venice and the Arabesque*.

Part I



THE PROBLEM



THE ARTS IN RENAISSANCE ITALY

In the age of the cultural movement known as the Renaissance, more or less the two centuries 1350–1550, Italy was neither a social nor a cultural unit, although the concept of ‘Italia’ existed. It was simply ‘a geographical expression’, as Count Metternich said in 1814 (nearly half a century before Italy would become a unified state). However, geography influences both society and culture. For example, the geography of the region encouraged Italians to devote more attention to commerce and the crafts than their neighbours did. The central location of the peninsula in Europe, and easy access to the sea, gave its merchants the opportunity to become middlemen between East and West, while its terrain, one-fifth mountainous and three-fifths hilly, made farming more difficult than it was in England (say) or France. It is hardly surprising that Italian cities such as Genoa, Venice and Florence should have played a leading part in the commercial revolution of the thirteenth century, or that in 1300 some twenty-three cities in north and central Italy had populations of 20,000 or more apiece. City-republics were the dominant form of political organization at this time. A relatively numerous urban population and a high degree of urban autonomy underpinned the unusual importance of the educated layman (and to a lesser degree the educated laywoman). It would be difficult to understand the cultural and social developments of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries without reference to these preconditions.¹

In the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, a number of city-states lost their independence, and in the 1340s Italians, like people elsewhere in Europe and in the Middle East, were hit by slump and plague. However, the tradition of the urban way of life and of an educated laity survived and was central to the Renaissance, a minority movement that probably meant little or nothing to the majority of the population. Most Italians, about 9 or 10 million people altogether, were peasants, living

¹ Waley, *Italian City-Republics*; Martines, *Power and Imagination*, chs 1–4; Larner, *Italy in the Age of Dante and Petrarch*.

for the most part in poverty. They too had a culture, which is worth study, can be studied and has been studied, but it is not the subject of this book, which is concerned with new developments in the arts in their social context.

The aim of this book is to place, or re-place, the painting, sculpture, architecture, music, literature and learning of Renaissance Italy in their original environment, the society of the period – its ‘culture’ in the wider sense of that flexible term. In order to do this it is advisable to begin with a brief description of the main characteristics of the arts at this time. In this description the stress will fall on the viewpoint of posterity rather than that of contemporaries. (Their point of view is discussed in chapters 5 to 7). Although they sometimes wrote of ‘rebirth’, they did not have a clear and distinct idea of the Renaissance as a period. They were interested in poetry and rhetoric, but our idea of ‘literature’ would have been foreign to them, while a concept something like our ‘work of art’ was only just beginning to emerge at the end of the period.

This description will emphasize characteristics common to several arts more than those which seem to be restricted to one of them, and attempt to present the period as a whole (leaving the discussion of trends within it to chapter 10). The cultural unity of the age will not be assumed (as it was, for example, by Jacob Burckhardt), but it will be taken as a hypothesis to be tested.²

The conventional nineteenth-century view of the arts in Renaissance Italy (a view still widely shared today, despite the labours of art historians) might be summarized as follows. The arts flourished, and their new realism, secularism and individualism all show that the Middle Ages were over and that the modern world had begun. However, all these assumptions have been questioned by critics and historians alike. If they can be saved, it is only at the price of radical reformulations.

To say that the arts ‘flourished’ in a particular society is to say, surely, that better work was produced there than in many other societies, which leads one straight out of the realm of the empirically verifiable. It no longer seems as obvious as it once did that medieval art is inferior to that of the Renaissance. Raphael has been judged a great artist and Ariosto a great writer from their own time to the present, but there has been no such consensus about Michelangelo, Masaccio or Josquin des Près, however high their reputation now stands. All the same, few would quarrel with the suggestion that Renaissance Italy was a society where

² The cases for and against the idea of the cultural unity of an age are concisely and elegantly presented in Huizinga, ‘Task of cultural history’, and Gombrich, *In Search of Cultural History*. Further discussion in Burke, *Varieties of Cultural History*, pp. 183–212.

artistic achievements ‘clustered’.³ The clusters are most spectacular in painting, from Masaccio (or indeed from Giotto) to Titian; in sculpture, from Donatello (or from Nicola Pisano in the thirteenth century) to Michelangelo; and in architecture, from Brunelleschi to Palladio. The economic historian Richard Goldthwaite asks, ‘Why did Italy produce so much art in the Renaissance?’ Not only ‘more art’, but also ‘a greater variety’.⁴

Literature in the vernacular is a more difficult case. After Dante and Petrarch comes what has been called the ‘century without poetry’ (1375–1475), which is in turn followed by the achievements of Poliziano, Ariosto and many others. The fourteenth and the sixteenth centuries are great ages of Italian prose, but the fifteenth century is not (partly because scholars preferred to write in Latin).⁵ In the realm of ideas, there are many outstanding figures – Alberti, Leonardo, Machiavelli – and a major movement, that of the ‘humanists’, most exactly defined as the teachers of the ‘humanities’.⁶

The most conspicuous gaps in this account of Italian achievements are to be found in music and mathematics. Although much fine music was composed in Renaissance Italy, most of it was the work of Netherlanders, and it is only in the sixteenth century that composers of the calibre of the Gabriellis and Costanzo Festa appear. In mathematics, the famous Bologna school belongs to the later sixteenth century.⁷

It is more useful to investigate innovation rather than ‘flourishing’ in the arts because the concept is more precise. In Italy, the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were certainly a period of innovation in the arts, a time of new genres, new styles, new techniques. The period is full of ‘firsts’. This was the age of the first oil-painting, the first woodcut, the first copperplate and the first printed book (though all these innovations came to Italy from Germany or the Netherlands). The rules of linear perspective were discovered and put to use by artists at this time.⁸

The line dividing new from old is more difficult to draw in the case of genres than in the case of techniques, but the changes are obvious

³ The term comes from Kroeber, *Configurations of Culture Growth*. Although he writes as if ‘culture growth’ can be measured like economic growth, his comparisons and contrasts remain suggestive.

⁴ Goldthwaite, *Wealth and the Demand for Art*, p. 1.

⁵ Asor Rosa, *Letteratura italiana*.

⁶ The definition (precise, if perhaps too narrow) is that of Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought*.

⁷ On mathematics, Rose, *Italian Renaissance*; on music, Palisca, *Humanism*; Owens, ‘Was there a Renaissance in music?’, Fenlon, *Music and Culture*; Grove, *New Dictionary of Music*, vol. 21, pp. 178–86.

⁸ Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*; Edgerton, *Renaissance Rediscovery*.

enough. In sculpture we see the rise of the free-standing statue, and more especially that of the equestrian monument and the portrait-bust.⁹ In painting, too, the portrait emerged as an independent genre.¹⁰ It was followed rather more slowly by the landscape and the still-life.¹¹ In architecture, one scholar has described the fifteenth century as the age of the 'invention' of conscious town planning, although some medieval towns had been designed on a grid plan.¹² In literature, there was the rise of the comedy, the tragedy and the pastoral (whether drama or romance).¹³ In music, the emergence of the *frottola* and the madrigal, both types of song for several voices.¹⁴ Art theory, literary theory, music theory and political theory all became more autonomous in this period.¹⁵ In education, we see the rise of what is now called 'humanism' and was then called 'the studies of humanity' (*studia humanitatis*), an academic package which emphasized five subjects in particular, all concerned with language or morals: grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history and ethics.¹⁶

Innovation was conscious, though it was sometimes seen and presented as revival. The classic statement about innovation in the visual arts is that of the mid-sixteenth-century artist-historian Giorgio Vasari, with his three-stage theory of progress since the age of the 'barbarians'. The same pride in innovations is noticeable in his description of his own work in Naples, the first frescoes 'painted in the modern manner' (*lavorati modernamente*). He makes frequent contemptuous references to what he calls the 'Greek style' and the 'German style' – in other words, Byzantine and Gothic art.¹⁷ Musicians also thought that great innovations had been made in the fifteenth century. Johannes de Tinctoris,

⁹ Pope-Hennessy, *Italian Renaissance Sculpture*; Seymour, *Sculpture in Italy*; Avery, *Florentine Renaissance Sculpture*; Janson, 'Equestrian monument'.

¹⁰ The many studies include Pope-Hennessy, *Portrait in the Renaissance*; Campbell, *Renaissance Portraits*; Partridge and Starn, *Renaissance Likeness*; Simons, 'Women in frames'; Mann and Syson, *Image of the Individual*; Cranston, *Poetics of Portraiture*; Christiansen and Weppelmann, *Renaissance Portrait*.

¹¹ On the landscape, Gombrich, *Norm and Form*, pp. 107–21, and Turner, *Vision of Landscape*; on the still-life, Sterling, *Still Life Painting*, and Gombrich, *Meditations*, pp. 95–105.

¹² Westfall, *In this Most Perfect Paradise*. For general trends, Heydenreich and Lotz, *Architecture in Italy*; Millon, *Italian Renaissance Architecture*.

¹³ Herrick, *Italian Comedy and Italian Tragedy*.

¹⁴ Einstein, *Italian Madrigal*; Bridgman, *Vie musicale*, ch. 10.

¹⁵ Panofsky, *Idea*; Blunt, *Artistic Theory*; Weinberg, *History of Literary Criticism*; Skinner, *Foundations*.

¹⁶ Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought*, ch. 1

¹⁷ On Vasari's view of 'progress', Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, pp. 147–235; Gombrich, 'Vasari's Lives'.