**Why Renaissance? Why Florence?**

By [Jon Cook](http://www.historytoday.com/taxonomy/term/947) | Published in [History Review](http://www.historytoday.com/taxonomy/term/83) [2003](http://www.historytoday.com/taxonomy/term/14777)

Jon Cook identifies the mix of factors that helps explain the Florentine Renaissance.

When Edmund Blackadder memorably lamented, ‘Baldrick, to you the Renaissance was just something that happened to other people’, it was probably the citizens of Florence to whom he was referring. For nowhere else were the ingredients that enabled the Renaissance to flourish – a politically-active citizenry, a vigorous humanist movement and abundant wealth – better blended. It is these ingredients, in Italy in general and in Florence in particular, that are the subject of this essay.

**Politics**

Politically, Italy was different from the rest of Europe. Whereas elsewhere monarchs ruled their kingdoms as God’s representatives on earth, most of the Italian peninsula (Naples and the Papal States were exceptions) consisted of city-states in which power was shared between a greater or lesser number of the inhabitants. Political life was therefore a good deal more complicated in Florence, Milan, Venice, Siena, and their like than it was in the feudal world of oath-making and obligation.

In Italy, politics was a colourful and often bloody business. Within cities, the leading family or families held power and were prepared to use every means from ballot rigging to political assassination in their bid to keep it. But, despite such chicanery, political fortunes could fall as well as rise: challenges came sometimes from the guilds who were the rulers’ social inferiors and at other times from jealous members of the rulers’ own class who might find themselves excluded from a share of political power. Between cities, rivalry was every bit as intense, as states, armed with the muscle of hired mercenaries, squabbled with one another for control of the countryside that separated them. Such was the volatile nature of Italian politics that it was not unknown for mercenary servants of city-states to become their masters, as the troubled history of 15th-century Milan suggests.

**Humanism**

It was in such a dynamic political atmosphere that the Italian city-states nurtured the great intellectual movement of the Renaissance: humanism. Insofar as humanism consisted of a study of classical remains and classical texts, it was not new: medieval scholars had done plenty of that, especially in Italy, where the relics of the classical past lay literally all around. But whereas medieval thinkers had scrutinised antiquity for signs of a divine plan that vindicated the teachings of the church, what 15th-century humanists believed – and this was new – was that classical civilisation was altogether different from, and superior to, medieval times in the way it looked at the world.

With this belief came a realisation among the humanists that what they read and learned of the classical period had a practical value for their own lives. Hence, without renouncing Christianity, they strove to imitate and then to surpass their classical ancestors in government, in art, in literature, in building and so on. To rulers seeking to legitimise their political control in an uncertain world, or to architects trying to build a brighter one, classical examples had much to teach.

As a further contrast with the medieval period from which they were conscious they were emerging – a world in which scholars had been cloistered and thought had been theocentric – humanists often combined their studies with active political careers. Thus ‘civic humanism’ argued that antiquity demonstrated that the pursuit of wealth was not automatically to be condemned since it could be used for the benefit of the community. To merchants whose accumulated riches tweaked their consciences and contravened Christian teaching, beliefs like these were attractive indeed.

**Wealth**

For such ideas to be put into practice, one commodity above all was required: money. And nowhere else in Europe was there more of it than in Italy, a society full of rich guilds, rich cities ruled by rich merchants, and rich popes. Europe in the 15th century depended on Italy for much of its commerce, and on this the guilds and merchants grew wealthy. It was this wealth that made patronage of the arts possible.

**Florence and the Medici**

Nowhere in Italy was this mixture of ingredients to prove more fruitful for the development of the Renaissance than Florence. Politically, the Medici family was able to dominate the city for much of the 15th century, but even though most of the merchant class shared their interest, the Medici required both political skill and careful election management to survive. The most spectacular challenge to their authority was the Pazzi conspiracy, in which Lorenzo de Medici was attacked and his brother Giuliano killed whilst celebrating mass in the cathedral in 1478. And when the family was violently expelled from the city and replaced by the fanatical Dominican Savonarola in 1494, it was clear that not even Medici wisdom and experience could save Florence from political turmoil indefinitely.

Civic humanism had received its greatest stimulus at a time of grave adversity for the city: the war with Milan of 1402. But when Gian Galeazzo Visconti, the head of the Milanese army which seemed set to overrun Florence, died suddenly, the Florentines believed it was not chance but civic virtue that had ensured their deliverance. The city’s 15th-century chancellors – Salutati and Bruni among them – taught the people that they were the heirs of the Roman republic and that it was the duty of scholars to immerse themselves in public life. And the most famous of the Medici, Lorenzo the Magnificent (in power between 1469 and his death in 1492) was a humanist, a passionate book collector and an enthusiastic patron of the arts. The Platonic Academy – a circle of the leading humanists: Poliziano, Pico, Ficino and others – formed part of his household and helped him find ‘relief in learning’. No one did more than Lorenzo to perpetuate the Florentine humanist tradition he had been so proud to inherit.

Just as significant, Florence’s wealth was crucial for the growth of Renaissance culture. The City’s long-established cloth trade and banking tradition had made it peculiarly prosperous, so that by the 15th century a number of groups were eager to demonstrate their wealth through artistic patronage. The guilds constantly strove to outdo each other with the extravagance of their artistic commissions, and wealthy individuals built palaces and commissioned altar-pieces or frescoes in churches for their personal glorification and spiritual welfare. The numerous frescoes in the chapels within Santa Croce, for example, provide colourful evidence of the eagerness of Florentine families like the Strozzi and the Bardi to demonstrate their wealth – and their piety. This trend for self-advertisement, which was to become a key feature of Renaissance patronage, was best exemplified by Masaccio, in one of the greatest of all Renaissance frescoes, ‘The Holy Trinity’. In it, the donors, Lorenzo Lenzi and his wife, can be seen kneeling but unabashed in the presence of none other than St John the Baptist, Mary, Christ and God the Father himself!

And the Medici family – acting as both individuals and on behalf of the state – were artistic patrons par excellence, collecting books, building palaces and churches and commissioning the paintings that decorated them. The Palazzo Medici and the church of San Lorenzo are two of their most famous legacies to the city, but more effective than either as a piece of artistic patronage is Gozzoli’s magnificent fresco ‘The Journey of the Magi’. In it, Lorenzo is depicted as one of the kings, with his father, Piero (who commissioned the work), and his grandfather, Cosimo, prominent in his retinue. What more could a patron ask for than to have his family so brilliantly and vividly portrayed, and its right to rule legitimised, with the help of so dramatic and recognisable a biblical setting? Here, on the walls of the chapel in which they received foreign ambassadors, the glory and longevity of the Medici had become brazenly synonymous with the power of the Florentine state itself. No wonder such patronage nurtured native artistic genius. No wonder artists flocked to Florence from far and near.

In these ways, Florence exemplified the change in high culture that separated the ‘Renaissance’ from the ‘Middle Ages’. Unlike poor Baldrick, ordinary men and women in the streets of the 15th-century city would have been aware of these changes in the altar-pieces which decorated the churches in which they worshipped, in the statues that adorned its piazzas, and in the style and sumptuousness of its new buildings. It is the preservation of these features that makes Florence such an enticing city today.