Italian Renaissance Geography

By: Richard A. Phifer
**Introduction to Italian Renaissance Geography**

The **Italian Renaissance** began in the late 1300’s A.D. and lasted into the late 1500’s. During this span of time an important evolution of culture took place. Increasingly, human senses and reason became the tools people used to understand the world and nature. Traditional ideas about man’s relationship to God and the true purpose of life were reexamined. The driving force behind this change was an intellectual movement supported by an elite minority of educated, wealthy men. Called **Humanism**, it had a huge impact on how people viewed the world and their place in it. The lessons in this unit will look at how the ideas of the Italian Renaissance changed the landscape of cities and places. Renaissance ideas eventually spread across Europe and had a lasting effect on Western civilization.

The “new” ideas of the humanists were actually a thousand years old but they had been forgotten during the medieval period. The ancient Greeks and Romans are considered to be a part of the “classical” period in history. The ideas of ancient Greece were further developed by the ancient inhabitants of Italy, the Romans. Ancient Rome survived from the 9th century B.C. until the 5th century A.D. A large amount of Europe was under Roman control at the height of the empire’s power in 117 A.D. (see the map on this page and the timeline below).

**Humanism**: A new way of thinking that emphasized a well-rounded education, stressed human reason above reliance on faith and tradition alone to explain the world and its purpose, and encouraged the study of art, architecture, astronomy, and literature.

**Italian Renaissance**: An important transformation of thought and culture that brought Europe from medieval to modern times. Renaissance ideas led to great advancements in art, literature, science, and architecture. Italian Renaissance ideas spread northward and sparked a rebirth of learning and art in northern Europe as well.
Ancient Roman and Greek cultures were very sophisticated. Their cities had temples for worshipping many gods, markets for shopping, libraries, bathing complexes, and open-air theatres for entertainment. Because frequent war was a fact of life, large armies needed to be maintained and Roman cities were almost always surrounded by defensive walls. Streets in ancient cities were not named and were often confusing. People used temples and statues as landmarks to navigate the hundreds of winding streets in the city. Civic buildings and temples could be found in central locations, while simple homes and common buildings were located in surrounding areas. The muddy streets were often strewn with trash and sewage, and the main roads remained crowded and noisy even after dusk. Animals shared the roads with people and slow-moving carts. Most Romans lived in crowded apartments that could become breeding grounds for disease during hot summers. Fire and building collapse were common threats. Because of the Mediterranean climate, people could spend most of their time outdoors to socialize. People gathered in public places such as baths or at sporting events.
The fall of the Roman Empire, culminating with the sack of Rome in 476 A.D., ended the classical age in history. Italy and the rest of Europe entered a period of relative decline and disorganization now called the Middle Ages, which was to last for about one thousand years. City life in medieval Italy was less pleasant than in classical times. For fear of enemy armies and common bandits, people crowded inside walled cities. Streets between buildings could be as narrow as a person’s shoulders. Such streets became dark and dirty breeding grounds for disease. Open space within the city walls was limited so crops were grown outside of the city walls. Life expectancy declined. Winters could be harsh and often brought bouts of famine. Most people had diets that lacked the proper fruits, vegetables, or proteins. Medieval medicines were often ineffective and people relied on the Church for spiritual healing in these times of difficulty.

The Roman Catholic Church was the most important institution in medieval Italy, and because of their size and soaring architecture, its churches dominated the city center. Shops and apartments lined the streets that meandered from the city center to the walls. The painting of Florence on this page is a good example. The cathedral is in the center with the city walls in the background. Beyond the walls are unprotected fields.

**RIGHT:** A typical street in the city of Siena, in Italy, is an example of the densely constructed buildings and dark corridors of medieval cities in Italy.
**Things to look for in the medieval landscape!**

**CREATIVE URBAN LANDSCAPE**
Negotiation and interaction among social groups can be detected in the built landscape through the random street patterns and multi-layered buildings that show free creativity in shape or style.

**DEFENSIVE WALLS**
Fortified walls surrounding the city that were built for defense.

**CENTRALLY LOCATED CHURCHES**
Churches were the most important and visible buildings in the medieval city. They were often built in the center of the city.

**CROWDED PUBLIC SPACES**
Busy city streets that serve as the main setting for daily activities. Often these streets are not well ventilated and can be unsanitary.

**POINTED ARCH**
The Gothic pointed arch was the most common architectural form in the medieval landscape.

**GOthic ArchITecture**
Medieval churches were often built in the Gothic style. Cathedrals were built very high and with many windows, which flooded the church with God’s light and made people feel closer to heaven. Decorations were common and included elaborate stained glass windows and grotesque sculpted figures known as gargoyles.
**Things to look for in the Renaissance landscape!**

**NATURE**
Nature was central to the physical and cultural landscapes of the Renaissance. Art and architecture incorporated plants, wildlife, and the human body. No humanist did more to understand the natural world than Leonardo da Vinci. Leonardo sketched many living beings, including this grove of trees.

**DOMED BUILDINGS**
A Renaissance landscape placed importance on all types of buildings. Libraries, churches, palaces, and even farms were built in the proportional and defined style that the humanists promoted. The ability to construct a dome, one of the many concepts lost during the Middle Ages, was rediscovered during the Italian Renaissance.

**SEMICIRCLE ARCH**
The Roman Arch, first used by the ancient Romans, was the most common architectural form of the Italian Renaissance.

**SYMMETRY AND CENTRALITY**
Symmetrical forms and shapes were abundant in the Renaissance landscape. Many buildings were built in a central plan like the one shown here of St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome.

**PLANNED AND ORGANIZED CITIES**
City planning was a major innovation of the Italian Renaissance. Long, straight boulevards and central plazas were hallmarks of the time. The Italian city of Palmanova exhibits a planned radial street pattern.

**PERSPECTIVE**
The proper use of perspective in art is an important technique of the Italian Renaissance. When used properly, perspective can give a flat surface the appearance of multi-dimensionality.
Lesson 1: Rome, A City Reborn

By the end of the Middle Ages, Rome was a decrepit city, falling apart under a weakened Papal authority. The once majestic imperial city of the Caesars was afflicted by many of the common 14th century conditions. Economic stagnation, warfare, and diseases like the Bubonic Plague, which devastated the city in 1348, had left their mark. Living conditions in Rome during this time were far less sanitary than during the city’s ancient glory days when one million people lived in the city. Rome’s population had dwindled to a meager 20,000 inhabitants, most of whom had abandoned the city’s unsanitary peripheral fringes to congregate at the bend of the Tiber River in the city core. Rome’s ancient system of aqueducts had fed the outlying areas of the city with clean water for centuries but over time they had been neglected and the water supply slowly terminated. The Tiber River became the lifeline for citizens that remained, although its level of sanititation was quite suspect. Disease and illness were common and spread rampantly through the inadequately narrow, waste-littered streets and alleys of the medieval city.

TOP RIGHT: Model of ancient Rome c. 4th Century AD.

ABOVE: Innovatively designed Roman aqueducts carried pure water for miles from the surrounding mountains into the imperial city and were vital for sustaining the city’s large population.

LEFT: The School of Athens by Raphael, 1508-1511, Vatican City, Italy. Ancient Roman ruins such as the Pantheon in Rome lead humanists to believe that the circle was the most perfect and natural form, both central and symmetrical. The humanists therefore concluded that their cities should be planned using symmetrical forms such as squares, straight lines, and circles or ovals.

LEFT INSET: Transverse of the Pantheon in Rome, 118-125 AD.
During this time the Pope resided in the city of Avignon in France. Avignon benefited financially from being at the center of the Catholic world. Without the wealth of the Church, Rome had nothing to lift it from its state of misery. By 1417 the Pope had returned to Rome which once again became home to the papal court. Renaissance humanism was at this point well under way. The popes in Rome were generally worldly men and skilled politicians. They knew that by embracing humanism and using their unmatched wealth to build new structures that expressed the new ideas, they could turn Rome into a cultural center with the Vatican at its core. Popes over the next century and a half would make it their personal mission to beautify the city and return the splendor that had since vanished.

Nicholas V was the first pope to embrace the humanist ideals. Elected in 1447, he developed an elaborate scheme to revitalize Rome, to increase papal patronage of the arts, and to renovate the Vatican. The humanists of the time produced grand drawings and plans of an ‘ideal city’. Following the ideals of classical city form, they promoted organization, centrally designed plazas, axial streets and grand buildings created in the best architectural form. Renaissance popes were influenced by these ideas and imprinted them onto Rome. Whereas some Renaissance artists used canvas or blocks of marble to fashion their masterpieces, the popes used Rome to create their work of art.

\[\text{BELOW: This view of an ideal city by an anonymous artist c. 1500 portrays the organization, shapes, and forms which humanists valued during the Renaissance. If you look closely, you will be able to identify many symmetrical shapes such as circles, squares, diamonds, octagons, and rectangles. Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore, MD.}\]
The high-point of Rome’s urban renewal came during the pontificate of Sixtus V. The pope and his engineer-architect, Domenico Fontana, embarked upon an ambitious plan to redevelop and expand the city. Buildings were demolished to make way for new monuments and wide, straight streets. These new avenues were built with the church in mind, connecting the city’s most important Christian sites. It was expected that these new streets would facilitate pilgrimages and religious processions, commercial activity, and law enforcement. New housing was built and the city’s wealthier citizens began to erect gaudy palaces. Decrepit aqueducts were fixed and new ones built in order to repopulate the more peripheral zones of the city. Fontana erected numerous public fountains which brought the Romans clean drinking water. Obelisks were mounted in public squares as symbols of Rome’s renewed glory. The renovation of the Vatican continued and the dome of the glorious new St. Peter’s Basilica was completed.

**Comprehension Exercise:** Below are two drawings of the same site in Rome, the Campidoglio, which was the center of government in ancient Roman times. To the left is a drawing by Michelangelo c. 1547 of the site in its medieval form, prior to renovation. To the right is Michelangelo’s drawing of the site following the completion of its urban renewal c. 1568. Compare these two drawings and fill out the comparison chart in the student book which will help you understand how Rome’s cityscape changed during the Renaissance.
Map Comprehension Exercise

Examine the maps of Rome on this page and page 10. Use the blank map of Rome in the student response booklet to label your answers.

1: Label Vatican City and the Tiber River on the blank map of Rome in the student booklet.

2: If a traveler was walking from the Coliseum toward Vatican City, which direction would he be walking in: Northwest, Northeast, Southwest, or Southeast? (Circle One) Be sure to note the compass on each map and how the map is oriented.

3: Identify the medieval roads in Rome and the Renaissance roads. Shade in the medieval section of Rome on the blank map. How would you characterize the street patterns in the medieval section of Rome?

4: What might the dark black lines surrounding the city symbolize? Hint: What type of structures usually determined the boundaries of older cities?

5: Wealthy men built new palaces in locations that were close enough to the hustle and bustle of the city but in areas where there were not many existing buildings. Which would be the best place to locate such a palace: A, B, or C? Assume most daily activity took place in the medieval core. (Circle A, B, or C on the map) Explain the reasoning behind your answer in a few sentences.

6: Rome is not a flat city. In fact, the city was built around seven hills. How does this help to explain why many of the medieval roads are windy and curved?
ABOVE: Plan of Rome, Papal Sponsor: Vatican City. This plan of Rome depicts the urban renewal of Rome and the projects associated to the appropriate popes during the Renaissance. Visible is the medieval core of the city along with the plans of the numerous long streets constructed to revitalize the areas within the ancient walls of the city.

BELOW: This statue of Moses is the central figure of the papal tomb sculpted by Michelangelo for Pope Julius II. Julius II was one of the most influential popes of the Renaissance. During his papal term, Julius II dedicated much attention to the beautification of the Vatican.
Lesson 2: Venice and the High Renaissance

The city-state of Venice was a sea-faring culture which owed its livelihood to trade with other Italian cities as well as those along the Mediterranean coast. Venice was on an island, separate from the mainland, so there was little threat of enemy attacks and therefore no need for defensive walls. It was Venice’s unique physical location between the mainland and the Adriatic Sea which enabled her to rise to prosperity as the gateway between northern Europe and the eastern Mediterranean Sea. In this lesson we will explore the conditions which created and modified Venice’s cultural identity.
The stable political system and advantageous geographical location of Venice allowed for her cultural prominence. The Venetian Republic was an oligarchy comprised of 500 aristocratic families. At the center of this political system sat the Doge, a ceremonial figure whose main purpose was to represent the citizens. In Venice the oligarchy never allowed one family to gain political control. There were no internal struggles and rivalries in Venice. The protection offered by the sea, a strong navy, and the surrounding Venetian mainland gave Venice little to fear in foreign threats. Venice had consequently been a cultural center before the start of the Renaissance.

The Venetian economy depended on diversity and international trade during the middle ages. Manufacturing and agricultural products from the mainland were also economic assets. High value goods which were easily transported such as spices, slaves, glass, silks, and gold became Venice’s niche in trade. Tradesmen from all over came to Venice, which had strong Jewish, Gentile, Greek, and Moslem presences. These foreign influences meshed with local traditions and Venice’s unique medieval cityscape was formed.

Traditional Venetian architecture complimented the city’s geographical location. Space combined with the interaction of light, water, and the environment characterize the medieval cityscape. Foreign influences, especially Byzantine and Islamic architecture, were adopted. This is no surprise as Venice traded heavily with Constantinople, capital of the Byzantine Empire in present day Turkey. Venice’s medieval culture became a unique mix of styles unlike any other Italian city-state of the time.

Venice’s medieval culture was based on a fusion between local tradition and foreign influences. The Doge’s Palace and St. Mark’s Basilica, pictured above, are great examples of the fusion that took place between local and foreign architectural styles. The Palace, home of the Doge, is unfortified and exhibits many openings to take advantage of the sea breezes. The arches feature Byzantine curves and Islamic points. The palace is ornate in style, symbolic of the city’s wealth, and light becomes accentuated by the materials used in the building. The Church of St. Mark is distinctly Byzantine, reflecting the city’s foreign contacts. Highly decorative, the church features mosaic coverings and pendentive domes typical of Byzantine architecture. These unique buildings are stark contrasts to those you would find in other Italian city-states during the time.
Comprehension Project

Many communities across the United States have cityscapes that show international links. Perhaps certain buildings are built in a style particular to one culture or country. The Zwaanendael Museum in Lewes, Delaware is a great example. Built in 1931 to commemorate the Dutch settlement of Delaware, this building has been erected featuring typical 17th century Dutch architectural elements. Terra-cotta roof tiles, carved stonework, and a stepped façade gable directly show Dutch influence on this community.

Your assignment is to write a brief report on a building in your community that shows the influence of a foreign culture or country. Answer the following questions in your report:

1: Which culture or country does your building represent?
2: How does the building echo the culture or country? (Be Specific)
3: What do you think the building’s purpose is? Was it always used for this purpose? How can you tell?
4: Was local geography an influence on the style of the building or the materials used to build it? Explain.

Zwaanendael Museum, Lewes, DE (1931)
The first decades of the 16th century were significant for the Republic of Venice. The wealthy city-state sought to expand its territories in mainland Italy due to an increase in power and population. Pope Julius II, angered over Venetian expansion into Northern Italy, formed an anti-Venetian alliance with King Louis XII of France and some German city-states. The League of Cambrai, as the allies were known, and Venice would be occupied by war from roughly 1508-1516.

The lengthy War of the League of Cambrai marked the beginning of a cultural transformation in Venice. During the near-decade of combat, Venetian cultural growth came to a halt as an entire generation of local artists, architects, and intellectuals died. By 1527, Venice and the Papal States were allied against Holy Roman Emperor Charles V of France. In May of this year, Rome was sacked by imperial troops. Humanists knowledgeable of Renaissance culture fled Rome and took refuge in Venice. A new generation of humanists had arrived in Venice, refilling the cultural void created by the war.

The High Renaissance flourished in Venice by the mid-16th century. The city was established as a cultural center through the printing of books, woodcuts, and engravings. The ‘new style’ of the Renaissance was being spread through printing and in Venice a cultural rebirth took place. Venetians embraced the new culture, believing their city to be the “new” and “real” Rome. Byzantine, Gothic, and Islamic ideals had been infused into the Venetian cityscapes for centuries. Those ideals were replaced by the rediscovered ancient Roman and Greek principles. An urban renewal plan was instituted in Venice with the goal of eradicating undignified trades and replacing the obsolete buildings of the past. Most of the renewal took place along the Grand Canal which acted as the city’s main street. The new style had taken root in this maritime city, and before long was spreading to the Venetian mainland and eventually into Northern Europe.
Venice was the most prosperous port city of the Renaissance. The map on this page (c. 1500) shows the maritime republic's substantial trade network. The red lines signify a Venetian trade route. Venice traded with numerous North African and European cultures.

Improvisational theatre began in High Renaissance Venice as a form of artistic entertainment. Popular themes included love and jealousy and had their origins in ancient Roman comedies. Venetian actors wore masks to signify certain characters such as the fool pictured above. Italian comedy spread to Europe and still exists today, even in America.
A diffusion of High Renaissance culture across the Venetian mainland took place in the 16th century. Wealthy families sought to escape the crowded city in favor of the country lifestyle. Farming and rural life evolved into a gentleman’s occupation. The well-educated neo-classical architect, Andrea Palladio, was instrumental in transporting classical ideals to the countryside. Palladio’s churches and villas adhered to the strictest rules of classical form and changed the cityscapes both in and around Venice. The Church of the Redeemer (Image 2), built by Palladio in Venice, illustrates Venice’s transition from a culture highly influenced by the eastern Mediterranean into one which came to idealize Renaissance form. Palladio’s villa architecture perfectly synthesized form and function. Villa Barbaro at Maser (Image 4) was a working farm symbolically used to show the status of its owner. The wings of the villa are used for farm activities while the central unit acts as the owners living quarters. Set on a hill, Palladio’s Villa Capra (Image 3) capitalizes on surrounding vistas and adheres to classical themes such as ancient Greek Temple fronts and the classically central circle within a square form. Palladio published treatises on his architecture and was so influential that his style became known as the Palladian style. Printings of Palladian architecture enabled for the diffusion of his style, most notably in England and the United States. Thomas Jefferson built Monticello (Image 5), his home in Virginia, in the Palladian style. Venice, whose own culture had been transformed by the Renaissance, was a major agent in the spread of Renaissance culture into greater Europe and the world.
Lesson 3: The Culture of Renaissance Italy
Villa Life and Gardens

Renaissance culture placed importance on a man’s intellect and knowledge. The most respected men, such as kings, dukes, and religious figures, were expected to be worldly with interests in reading and the ability to appreciate art and architecture. This set these humanists apart from the common masses of laborers and tradesmen. Cities were not always ideal places for study as they were noisy, crowded centers of business and negotiation. Wealthy humanists escaped the city at times and took refuge in quiet suburban villas. Villas became retreats where wealthy men could indulge in productive yet relaxing activities such as farming, reading, hunting, and hosting guests of high social status. The ability to experience nature was a reflection of wealth, and patrons constructed elaborate gardens to bring them more in touch with nature. Not a wild, untamed nature, but a manipulated environment that was very much man-made as will be seen.
The creation of elaborate gardens became the hobby of many Italian Renaissance humanists. Mixing art and nature to create a physical place that stimulated both the mind and senses appealed to wealthy patrons. Gardens were not only reminiscent of the classical past, but also expressions of wealth that could be shown off to others. Water, plants, and sculptures were used to create physical stimuli. A garden became a place where one could be both relaxed yet engaged at the same time.

Large amounts of effort and expenses went into the creation of Renaissance gardens. In the case of the Villa d’Este in Tivoli, the River Aniene had to be diverted so that water would run through the patron’s garden. Trees, bushes, and shrubs were planted, removed, and sometimes cut to look like animals. Topographical symbols and references were infused into the gardens. Elaborate fountains were designed to enjoy the sights, sound, and touch of flowing water. Renaissance gardens represent one way in which landscapes were altered during this time of cultural growth.

In creating their gardens, wealthy humanists altered the physical geography of the land. Landscapes were structured and crafted with a human touch, designed around geometric forms that the humanists believed embodied perfection. Nature was manipulated to be orderly and aesthetically pleasing, not natural as it was. Renaissance gardens allowed for the interaction between man and an ideally planned nature. It is important to understand that the humanists were manipulating nature into their image of perfection. In a sense, they believed that even nature could be improved upon and that there needed to be a distinct organization in the “natural” landscape.
ABOVE: The water organ and cascades of the Villa d’Este are depicted in this engraving by G.F. Venturini dated 1692. The idea that water could create music was embraced in Renaissance gardens. Flowing water would trigger sounds from the organ accompanied by the soothing sound of the splashing waterfalls.

RIGHT: A photo of the Oval Fountain at Villa d’Este shows how water can be formed to act as sculpture. Art and nature collide to create a beautiful landscape in many Renaissance gardens.

ABOVE: This historical view of the Fountain of Rome by G.F. Venturini shows the amount of effort and sophistication that went into Renaissance gardens. In this case a political statement is made by the Fountain of Rome, which is fed by the Fountain of Tivoli, alluding to the belief of the d’Este family that Tivoli was greater than Rome.

RIGHT/BELOW: The Villa Orsini in Bomarzo creates a sense of unease by teasing visitors with grotesque sculptures and deceiving structures.
Citations & Acknowledgements

IMAGES


Page 3: Unknown Artist, 15th C. Florence, Plan View of the City, c. 1475.

Page 3: Photograph of a City Street in Siena.


Page 5: Unknown Artist, 15th C. Florence, Plan View of the City, c. 1475.

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Page 5: Ambrogio Lorenzetti, Peaceful City, detail from Effects of Good Government in the City and in the Country, Sala della Pace, Palazzo Pubblico, Siena, Italy, 1338-1339.

Page 6: Ambrogio Lorenzetti, Peaceful City, detail from Effects of Good Government in the City and in the Country, Sala della Pace, Palazzo Pubblico, Siena, Italy, 1338-1339.

Page 6: Palmanova Town Plan, c. 1593.

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Page 6: The Pantheon, Rome, Italy, Diagram: Transverse Section, 118-125 A.D.

Page 6: Raphael, The School of Athens, Stanza della Segnatura, Vatican City, Italy, 1508-1511.

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BOOK OF INTEREST


READERS GLOSSARY

Ancient: adj. Before the end of the Western Roman Empire (476 AD).
Basilica: n. An early Christian or medieval church of the type especially built in Italy. The term also refers to the Roman Catholic Church’s practice of using this term to designate certain churches with special religious privileges.
Classical: adj. Pertaining to Greek or Roman antiquity.
Doge: n. The chief magistrate in the former Republic of Venice.
Ducal: adj. Of or relating to/belonging to a Duke or Duchy.
Fresco: n. The art of painting on moist, fresh plaster with colors ground up and dissolved in water.
Papal: adj. Of or pertaining to/belonging to the Pope or Papacy.
Patron: n. A person who supports with money an artist, writer, or institution in exchange for services.
Pendentive: n. The portion of a vault by means of which a square structure may be fitted with a circular dome.
Pilgrimage: n. A journey made to a sacred place as an act of religious devotion.
Pontificate: n. The office or term of office of a Pope.
Pope: n. The bishop of Rome and head of the Roman Catholic Church on earth.
Procession: n. A religious or ceremonial parade or march.
Roman Catholic Church: n. The Christian church characterized by an episcopal hierarchy with the Pope, or bishop of Rome, as its supreme head.
Rusticated: v. To cut or shape masonry blocks so as to create a bold, textured look; To appear rough-hewn.
Vatican: n. The chief residence of the popes in Vatican City, now also including a library, archives, art museum, apartments, and administrative offices.
Italian Renaissance Geography
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Florence, Plan View of City c. 15th Century, Artist Unknown