



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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CONTENTS



Illustrations	vii
INTRODUCTION	1
<i>The Theme</i>	1
<i>The Approach</i>	4
<i>A Revised Edition</i>	8

PART I THE PROBLEM

1 THE ARTS IN RENAISSANCE ITALY	17
2 THE HISTORIANS: THE DISCOVERY OF SOCIAL AND CULTURAL HISTORY	32

PART II THE ARTS IN THEIR MILIEU

3 ARTISTS AND WRITERS	47
<i>Recruitment</i>	47
<i>Training</i>	56
<i>The Organization of the Arts</i>	67
<i>The Status of the Arts</i>	80
<i>Artists as Social Deviants</i>	88
4 PATRONS AND CLIENTS	94
<i>Who are the Patrons?</i>	95
<i>Patrons v. Artists</i>	107
<i>Architecture, Music and Literature</i>	118
<i>The Rise of the Market</i>	125
5 THE USES OF WORKS OF ART	132
<i>Magic and Religion</i>	133
<i>Politics</i>	138
<i>The Private Sphere</i>	148
<i>Art for Pleasure</i>	151

6	TASTE	152
	<i>The Visual Arts</i>	153
	<i>Music</i>	161
	<i>Literature</i>	164
	<i>Varieties of Taste</i>	166
7	ICONOGRAPHY	171
PART III THE WIDER SOCIETY		
8	WORLDVIEWS: SOME DOMINANT TRAITS	187
	<i>Views of the Cosmos</i>	188
	<i>Views of Society</i>	198
	<i>Views of Man</i>	203
	<i>Towards the Mechanization of the World Picture</i>	211
9	THE SOCIAL FRAMEWORK	215
	<i>Religious Organization</i>	215
	<i>Political Organization</i>	220
	<i>The Social Structure</i>	228
	<i>The Economy</i>	234
10	CULTURAL AND SOCIAL CHANGE	241
	<i>Generations</i>	242
	<i>Structural Changes</i>	249
11	COMPARISONS AND CONCLUSIONS	255
	<i>The Netherlands</i>	256
	<i>Japan</i>	259
	APPENDIX: THE CREATIVE ELITE	264
	REFERENCES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY	266
	INDEX	314

ILLUSTRATIONS

1.1	Carlo Crivelli: <i>The Annunciation with Saint Emidius</i> , 1486	24
1.2	Domenico Ghirlandaio: <i>Adoration of the Shepherds</i> , Santa Trinità, Florence	26
1.3	The Colleoni Chapel in Bergamo	30
2.1	Gentile da Fabriano: <i>Adoration of the Shepherds</i> (detail), Galleria Uffizi, Florence	40
3.1	A bust of Filippo Brunelleschi, Florence Cathedral	55
3.2	The training of a humanist at university, from C. Landino: <i>Formulario di lettere e di orationi volgari con la preposta</i> , Florence	59
3.3	Woodcut of Adriaan Willaert, from <i>Musica Nova</i> , 1559	63
3.4	Agostino Veneziano's engraving of Baccio Bandinelli's 'Academy' in Rome	65
3.5	Giovanni de Udine: Stucco relief showing Raphael's workshop (detail), in the Vatican Loggia	69
3.6	The architect Filarete leading his apprentices, from the doors of St Peter's, Rome	70, 71
3.7	Titian: <i>Portrait of Giulio Romano</i>	83
3.8	Palma Vecchio: <i>Portrait of a Poet</i>	91
3.9	Giulio Romano: The Palazzo del Te, Mantua, detail of a frieze with slipped triglyphs	92
4.1	Lorenzo Vecchietta: <i>San Bernadino da Siena</i> (detail)	97
4.2	Battista Dossi: <i>Madonna with Saints and the Confraternity</i>	100
4.3	Andrea del Castagno: <i>The Youthful David</i> , tempera on leather mounted on wood, c.1450	101
4.4	Leonardo da Vinci: <i>Isabella d'Este</i>	106
4.5	Agnolo Bronzino: <i>Ugolino Martelli</i>	108
4.6	Pietro Perugino: <i>Battle of Love and Chastity</i>	112
4.7	Raphael: <i>Leo X</i>	121
4.8	Titian: <i>Pietro Aretino</i>	125
5.1	Sandro Botticelli: <i>The Punishment of Korah, Dathan and Abiron</i> , Sistine Chapel, Vatican	137

5.2	School of Piero della Francesca: <i>Portrait of Alfonso of Aragon</i>	140
5.3	Donatello: <i>Judith and Holofernes</i>	142
5.4	Benvenuto Cellini: <i>Cosimo I de' Medici</i>	143
5.5	Massaccio: <i>The Tribute Money</i> (detail)	144
5.6	Andrea del Sarto: <i>Two Men Suspended by their Feet</i> (detail), red chalk on cream paper	145
5.7	Vittore Carpaccio: <i>The Reception of the English Ambassadors and St Ursula Talking to her Father</i>	150
6.1	Interior of the Pazzi Chapel in Florence	159
6.2	Raphael: <i>Marriage of the Virgin</i>	160
6.3	The interior of San Francesco della Vigna, Venice	163
7.1	Leonardo da Vinci: <i>The Virgin, Child and Saint Anne</i>	178
7.2	Giorgio Vasari: <i>Portrait of Lorenzo de' Medici</i>	179
8.1	Dosso Dossi: <i>Circe</i>	197
8.2	Pinturicchio: <i>Self-Portrait</i> (detail from <i>The Annunciation</i>)	207

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