



The Renaissance

Will Durant

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A colorful pageant of princes & kings, painters & philosophers, scientists & architects comes to life in Will Durant's study of the Italian Renaissance, Vol. 5 of The Story of Civilization. He sets the stage in Florence for the opening act of a magnificent cultural flowering spread across Europe & continued thru time. Even more than its artistic awakening, the Renaissance stands as a declaration of mental freedom. It was a great contribution to the progress of humankind.

"Dr. Durant has a keen and mordant wit that flashes forth frequently to enliven his pages...he is an artist in words."--Saturday Review

The Renaissance Details

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From Reader Review The Renaissance for online ebook

Moud Barthez says

What a spectacular journey through the vast sea of the Italian Renaissance!

How endless was the wealth of this Renaissance, which even in its waning produced men like Tintoretto and Veronese, Aretino and Vasari, Paul III and Palestrina, Sansovino and Palladio, Duke Cosimo and Cellini, and such art as the rooms of the Ducal Palace and St. Peter's dome!

we've got to meet Humanists like Francesco Petrarck and Giovanni Boccaccio, and witness the feverish fiery speeches and the Revolution of Cola di Rienzo, and the Babylonian captivity of the papacy also known as The Popes in Avignon, Popes of Rome without Rome.

then the Rise of the Medici, the life of Cosimo de medici till The Golden Age of Lorenzo de' Medici the Magnificent, After whom Florence declined, and Italy knew no peace.

Afterward we will go through the destruction of secular art and culture, upon the ascending of Girolamo Savonarola to the throne of Florence, and the Birth of the Republic.

the Book will dive deep in the life of the Italian City states, Milan, Piemonte, Liguria, Pavia, Genoa, Tuscany and Umbria.

Bob Nichols says

This Durant volume was disappointing, particularly when compared to Volumes I-IV. In this history, Durant covers three centuries or so of Italy's renaissance history. By "renaissance," it seems that Durant means Italy's artistic impulses (e.g., Da Vinci, Michelangelo, Raphael) and its economic vitality.* While acknowledging Durant's fondness for all things Italian of this age, there's plenty of "same old, same old" in this historical period in this historical place. Politics were power politics; the papacy was ordinary and rude; religiosity was pervasive and the poor were kept in their place. More importantly, in his "history of civilization," Durant is strikingly silent about why this period and this place warrants its own volume, i.e., why it is significant for us to know and why, say, equivalent treatments should not be given to Indian and Chinese civilizations. That brings the reader to the troubling impression that civilization for Durant, at least in this volume, is Western.**

As in his other works, Durant's writing itself in this volume is impressive but, in the sweep of history, there is way too much information. Durant is so knowledgeable but a good part of the historian's task is to be selective, even highly so, and not to share all.

*In "The Course of Civilization," historians Joseph Strayer, Hans Gatzke, and E. Harris Harbison write of the Renaissance that "Italian Humanists managed to persuade future generations that theirs was an age of light after darkness" but that this "remained a vague and hazy historical conception" until Jacob Burckhardt's "brilliant book called 'The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy' (1860)." Strayer, Gatzke, and Harbison, state that Burckhardt "exaggerated both the sharpness of the breach with the medieval past and the uniqueness of Italy over against the rest of Europe." They go on to say that the 'Renaissance' is best used to

describe the revolution in artistic and literary taste," but that the term is less useful when applied to political and ecclesiastical history," and that "it is quite useless when applied to economic and social history...."

** A Wikipedia reference reminds us that Durant tried "to improve understanding of viewpoints of human beings and to have others forgive foibles and human waywardness. He chided the comfortable insularity of what is now known as Eurocentrism, by pointing out in *Our Oriental Heritage* that Europe was only 'a jagged promontory of Asia'. He complained of 'the provincialism of our traditional histories which began with Greece and summed up Asia in a line' and said they showed 'a possibly fatal error of perspective and intelligence'." That said, a question then becomes why Durant, in his eleven volume history of civilization, has only one volume (Volume 1) on South Asia and the Far East and even that volume is characterized as "our" (Western) oriental heritage.

Jack says

Durant writes of the Renaissance: "What frightening vitality there must have been in those Renaissance Italians, living amid violence, seduction, superstition, and war, yet eagerly alive to every form of beauty and artistry, and pouring forth-as if all Italy had been a volcano-the hot lava of their passions and their art, their architecture and assassinations, their sculpture and liaisons, their painting and brigandage, their Madonnas and grotesques, their hymns, and macaronic verse, their obscenities and piety, their profanity and prayers! Has there ever been elsewhere such depth and intensity of Yea-saying life? To this day we feel the lifting breath of that afflatus, and our museums overflow with the spared surplus of that inspired and frenzied age."

Will Durant has an amazing subject depth and writing skill.

Heman says

Venetian factoids:

italic font was made by a Francesco da Bologna, a calligrapher in the employ of Aldus Manutius. This Aldus was an obsessive scholar who managed the gargantuan task of editing and printing as many Greek and Latin classics as he could get his hands on. He marked all his books with a dolphin and anchor emblem, a colophon, that graces many books to this day. His motto was *Festina lente*: make haste slowly; ergo the fast dolphin and the fastened anchor. He died -predictably- poor and exhausted, but (so they say) fulfilled!!

There were no less than three Bellini painters, a father and two sons. The elder son was for while working for Sultan Mohammad II in Constantinople and made nude pictures for the Sultan's harem. The pictures were sadly -predictably- destroyed by Sultan's holier than thou successor.

Venice had a vendetta on artisans who sold its secrets abroad. A law decreed in 1454:

"if a workman carry into another country any art or craft to the detriment of the Republic, he will be ordered to return; if he refuses, his nearest relatives will be imprisoned, in order that the solidarity of the family may persuade him to return; if he persists in his disobedience, secret measures will be taken to have him killed wherever he may be."

Venice at its height in the 15th century had an annual income equal to the entire country of Spain.

Žiga says

The fifth book of the series once more gives us a brief glimpse of a bygone era, this time taking us to 14th and 15th century Italy. Durant's so called integral method of history paints a vigorous picture of numerous proud cities and notable potentates flourishing and vying in an endless cycle of longed for successes and great calamities, at a time when men were a law unto themselves, and contemned the unity of Italy the popes had sought to establish in the Middle ages.

Despite the turmoil and strife the period produced an unprecedented burst of artistic talent, culminating in the great trio of the suave Raphael, the titanic genius of uncouth Michelangelo and the polymathic intensity of Leonardo da Vinci.

Albeit the works of these and innumerable other artists are treated at considerable length, I was more fascinated by the sheer liveliness of the varied characters of the historic drama. From the banker Cosimo de Medici, posthumously named pater patriae for his consummate leadership of Florence during his lifetime, the dour reformist monk Savanarola, the unscrupulous campaigns of Cesare Borgia, to the martial pope who blessed the cannons with which he besieged his enemies and yet another pope who, like Pericles, ruled "by solid virtue and the pure force of argument", the book teems with the mingled lives of the many singular personalities that crowd its pages.

M. Ashraf says

We continue the story of Civilization (year#5) After Our Oriental Heritage, Life of Greece, Caesar and Christ and Age of Faith. Come The Renaissance, I think it needed more visual aids to see and witness the glory of the Renaissance, it is easier now with the internet but still.

We started in the 1300 with The Age of Petrarch and Boccaccio to the series of Popes and the christian life of the era. We witnessed The Rise of the Medici in Florence and the birth of Leonardo da Vinci, The most fascinating figure of the Renaissance, We saw the Papal states and the kingdom of Naples. The Rise and Fall of the Papacy. Raphael and Michelangelo. Michiavelli and the Prince... Till the collapse and fall with the League of Cambrai and the End of a Age.

The wars of invasion were not yet at an end, but they had already changed the face and character of Italy. The northern provinces had been so devastated that English envoys advised Henry VIII to leave them to Charles as a punishment. Genoa had been pillaged; Milan had been taxed to death. Venice had been subdued by the League of Cambrai and the opening of new trade routes. Rome, Prato, and Pavia had suffered sack, Florence had been starved and financially bled, Pisa had half destroyed herself in her struggle for freedom, Siena was exhausted with revolutions. Ferrara had impoverished herself in her long contest with the popes, and had dishonored herself by abetting the irresponsible attack upon Rome. The Kingdom of Naples, like Lombardy, had been ravaged and plundered by foreign armies, and had long languished under alien dynasties. Sicily was already the nursery of brigands. The only consolation of Italy was that its conquest by Charles V had probably saved it from spoliation by the Turks.

By the settlement of Bologna (1530) the control of Italy passed to Spain with two exceptions: cautious Venice retained her independence, and the chastened papacy was confirmed in its sovereignty over the States of the Church.

Another great book by Durant; but as I said earlier it was broad and needed more to show the true glory of the Renaissance. It is not as big as the previous books, will organized with excellent writing style. The last few chapters could serve as a sort of intro to the Reformation Age.

Jack says

This is my latest in the story of civilization. It's the best volume so far. The book focuses primarily on the Italian Renaissance, which probably is appropriate. Great characters- the Medici, Michelangelo, Leonardo, and a host of others. It amazes me that the church in general and the popes in particular played such dominant roles. The Durants do a great job of covering a lot of territory and keeping it entertainingly

Shawn Thrasher says

The Durants have a way with words, that even sixty years later are still amusing and appealing. Here they are, describing the falsely maligned Lucrezia Borgia: She "was not offended when her father chose a husband for her; that was then normal procedure for all good girls, and produced no more unhappiness than our own reliance on the selective wisdom of romantic love."

They also constantly cast a line hooking the Renaissance to the (then) present. Such as these passages:

[The Italian people] "oppressed by.. economic masters, and weary of faction, welcomed dictatorship in Florence in 1434, in Perugia in 1389, in Bologna in 1401, in Siena in 1477, in Rome in 1347 and 1922." Or this one: "We cannot hold the popes responsible for all the vice that gathered in papal Avignon. The cause was wealth, which has had like results in other times - in the Rome of Nero, the Rome of Leo X, the Paris of Louis XIV, the New York and Chicago of today." Or another, melancholy this time: "Filippino was invited to Prato to paint a Madonna; Vasari praised it, the Second World War destroyed it."

I always think of the Durants as the pop historians of their time; every library has this set of the History of Civilization. But the writing is really good; there is much detail connected by excellent prose.

Tim Ostler says

Although an enthusiast for Italian Renaissance art and architecture I had never studied its political and papal background in any depth. This is a hugely informative and edifying survey of the period that puts everything I knew before into perspective. It is worth being aware that this book was published in 1953 and so some of the attitudes of the author fall a bit short of current widely-held views -- notably his somewhat censorious comments about Leonardo's sexual orientation. But overall I found it an absorbing read.

David Glad says

Probably not the best book on the renaissance available these days, but Will Durant's writing style is always delightful which alone is why this surely belongs on a shelf of a half dozen or more renaissance books. Nice continuation of where his The Age of Faith left off. (Fun side note to that book was how singing and music in church initially were considered BAD before it was seen as a way of enhancing faith.)

As standard fare, excellent mention of Leonardo's multifaceted interests which apparently was also

Roy Lotz says

Doubtless like all of us he was many men, turned on one or another of his selves as occasion required, and kept his real self a frightened secret from the world.

So continues my tour through the ages.

The Renaissance, the fifth volume of *The Story of Civilization*, is unique in this series for its narrowness of scope. Instead of taking all of Western Europe as his subject, Durant confines himself to Italy; and whereas the previous volume took us from the death of Constantine (337) all the way to the death of Dante (1321), this volume covers the period from the birth of Petrarch (1304) to the death of Michelangelo (1564). Nevertheless, as usual, Durant casts a wide net, including political, economic, musical, philosophical, scientific, and literary history.

But of course, this being a book about the Renaissance, the bulk of it is given over to the visual arts: painting, sculpture, and architecture. This is shaky territory for Durant; he's certainly no art critic, as he admits from the outset. As usual, he is urbane, eloquent, and learned; but this isn't quite enough; some fire is missing. Durant was a man who lived on books, not paintings; he appreciates visual art as a dilettante rather than an aficionado. And since the literary activity of the Renaissance wasn't nearly as impressive as its artistic output, this deprives Durant of his forte.

Still, if you are looking for a single volume treatment of this age, I'm sure you could do worse than this book. It isn't deep, but it's broad; you will come away knowing all the major names—of politicians, poets, and painters—as well as a good deal about the time. Indeed, you may not realize how much you've learned, as it is one of Durant's signal talents that he is able to set down vast amounts of information in such a way that it sticks effortlessly in the memory.

Ignorant American that I am, I actually didn't know a whole lot about the Italian Renaissance before I read this book, apart from the facts that everybody can't help "knowing." For example, I "knew" the Renaissance consisted of a revival of classical learning, but of course the reality is far more complicated. Yes, during this time much classical learning was uncovered; but it's main effect seems not to have been a conversion to Greek logic and morality, but simply the realization that a non-Christian culture could be just as vibrant as a Christian one. The immediate effects of this weren't necessarily good. In his *History of Western Philosophy*, Bertrand Russell said: "The first effect of emancipation from the church was not to make men think rationally, but to open their minds to every sort of antique nonsense." And indeed, it struck me that the ideal of rational thinking and empirical science made little headway during this time period—at least in Italy.

I suppose the most direct effect of paganism was the rediscovery of the body as a source of beauty. Medieval Art is wholly lacking in the muscular, graceful nudes of the Renaissance. This went hand in hand with humanism. Humanity itself, like the human form, began to be celebrated. The most interesting question about all is, Why? Why did this sudden change come about? This is the proper question for the historian. But Durant doesn't try to answer it, or at the very least I found his answers superficial. I suppose I'll have to keep reading.

I have to say, it does bother me that Durant, an incredibly well-read and well-traveled man, and an intelligent one too, can frequently be so superficial a thinker and a critic. I will hazard a guess for the reason. One of the main features of Durant's style is its Olympian calm. He does not get excited; he avoids passion. Wars, revolutions, artistic triumphs—all are narrated in a tone of serene composure. He does his best to sound as if he is God himself, so far above the petty intellectual squabbles of historians, philosophers, and scientists that

he need not deign to partake in them. Thus he has the habit of offering his opinion in the royal “We.” Either that, or his pronouncements are simply stated as facts.

This attempt to appear above the fray limited him, I think. To make a real intellectual contribution means getting down in the trenches, to risk being contradicted, to defend one’s views. By writing like he does, Durant always plays the role of a gentleman on horseback, watching a battle from far away. He never picks up a pike and charges himself. Durant isn’t interested in that. It’s a shame, I think, because this impaired him as a historian, a philosopher, and a critic. For example, his pronouncements on literature and art, though articulate and fair, are seldom penetrating. To be a great critic, you have to expose yourself to the art, to let it wound you and overwhelm you, to let go of your composure and submit to the raw experience. Durant was apparently unwilling to do this. He wrote and thought through a spyglass.

Still, he was fantastic at what he did—namely, tell the story of western history as fully as possible, with clarity and charm—and that’s exactly I’ll keep reading him until I reach the end of this series. It’s been a great ride so far.

Jim LeMay says

Though I like Durant's writing style and the book is well organized for relating the information, he differs from the conclusions of other historians. He whitewashes the characters of many of the popes and other higher clergy, even those of the notorious Borgias and denies that Leonardo and Michelangelo were homosexual. He also claims that the immorality that plagued Italy came from people falling away from the church. In reality, the church gave a grievous example of morality for worshippers.

Ahmad Sharabiani says

The Renaissance (The Story of Civilization #5), Will Durant (Author), Ariel Durant (Editor)

The Renaissance (1953): This volume covers the history of Italy from c.1300 to the mid 16th century, focusing on the Italian Renaissance.

1 - Prelude: 1300–77:

1.1 - The Age of Petrarch and Boccaccio: 1304–75

1.2 - The Popes in Avignon: 1309–77

"Venetian merchants invaded every market from Jerusalem to Antwerp; they traded impartially with Christians and Mohammedans, and papal excommunications fell upon them with all the force of dew upon the earth." (p. 39)

2- The Florentine Renaissance: 1378–1534

2.1 - The Rise of the Medici: 1378–1464

2.2 - The Golden Age: 1464–92

2.3 - Savonarola and the Republic: 1492–1534

“But it took more than a revival of antiquity to make the Renaissance. And first of all it took money—smelly bourgeois money: ... of careful calculations, investments and loans, of interest and dividends accumulated until surplus could be spared from the pleasures of the flesh, from the purchase of senates, signories, and mistresses, to pay a Michelangelo or a Titian to transmute wealth into beauty, and perfume a fortune with the breath of art. Money is the root of all civilization.” (p. 67-68)

3 - Italian Pageant: 1378–1534

- 3.1 - Milan
- 3.2 - Leonardo da Vinci
- 3.3 - Tuscany and Umbria
- 3.4 - Mantua
- 3.5 - Ferrara
- 3.6 - Venice and Her Realm
- 3.7 - Emilia and the Marches
- 3.8 - The Kingdom of Naples

"He was not handsome; like most great men, he was spared this distracting handicap." (p. 185)

4 - The Roman Renaissance: 1378–1521

- 4.1 - The Crisis in the Church: 1378–1521
- 4.2 - The Renaissance Captures Rome: 1447–92
- 4.3 - The Borgias
- 4.4 - Julius II: 1503–13
- 4.5 - Leo X: 1513–21

5 - Debacle

- 5.1 - The Intellectual Revolt
- 5.2 - The Moral Release
- 5.3 - The Political Collapse: 1494–1534

6 - Finale: 1534–76

- 6.1 - Sunset in Venice
- 6.2 - The Waning of The Renaissance

7 - Envoi

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