



What was the Renaissance?

KS3 Ages 11-14 🕒 4 min read

The Renaissance (French for "rebirth") was a cultural and intellectual movement that swept through Europe from roughly the 14th to the 17th century, beginning in the Italian city-states. It represented a rediscovery of ancient Greek and Roman knowledge, a new interest in human experience and observation, and an explosion of achievement in art, literature, science, and philosophy that set the foundations for the modern world.

What was being "reborn"?

During the medieval period, much of the learning of ancient Greece and Rome had been preserved but relatively little developed, particularly in Western Europe. Church doctrine dominated intellectual life. The Renaissance was sparked partly by an influx of classical texts (accelerated by the fall of Constantinople in 1453, which pushed Byzantine scholars westward) and partly by the wealth of Italian trading cities like Florence, Venice, and Milan, whose merchant patrons could afford to fund artists and scholars.

Imagine if a generation of students suddenly discovered a library of extraordinary books that had been locked away for centuries — containing everything the ancient world had worked out about mathematics, medicine, philosophy, and the natural world. They'd read voraciously, build on what they found, argue about it, test it, and produce new ideas at an accelerating rate. That's roughly what happened in the Renaissance: the recovery of ancient learning acted as a catalyst, giving scholars tools and examples to launch entirely new inquiries.

Art

Renaissance art transformed from the flat, symbolic style of medieval painting to realistic, three-dimensional representation. Linear perspective — the mathematical technique for creating depth on a flat surface — was developed by Brunelleschi around 1420. Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, and Raphael produced works combining technical mastery with profound human observation. Leonardo's dissections of human bodies to understand anatomy, and his notebooks full of

engineering designs centuries ahead of their time, exemplify the Renaissance ideal: the curious, skilled, all-encompassing individual — the "Renaissance man."

Science

The Renaissance began the Scientific Revolution. Copernicus proposed that Earth orbited the Sun (not vice versa) in 1543. Galileo developed systematic experimental methods and telescopic astronomy. Vesalius revolutionised anatomy. Francis Bacon argued for evidence-based reasoning over inherited authority. These weren't just discoveries — they were a new *method*: observe, hypothesise, test. This method, and this attitude of questioning received wisdom, is the foundation of modern science.