

To truly understand the period in history that we call the Renaissance, we need to understand the attitudes of the people of that period toward nature and Man. It is often suggested that art and artists often show the way for the next step of culture. This may be more true during the Renaissance than at any other time of history. By looking at some of the key artists and their significant works we will try to understand how this period so rich in its arts, inventions, architect, and writing gave rise to humanism, a world view that competes with Christianity for the hearts and minds of the people of this world.

The painter Giotto introduced a critical change into the way nature and Man came to be seen. Giotto's works "gave nature a more proper place and his people were real people." Giotto's first great work was a painting of the Last Judgement. In this work he painted the face of the man who had commissioned the work and he brought the art of the period a giant step-forward by showing nature more like it really is. His people were larger than life in that they were oversized compared to the world around them but God's creation was now being painted as it was, and the importance of this first step should not be minimized. Not only were Giotto's paintings having an impact on his world but he was indeed an early representative of the "Renaissance Man," and one of his last creative acts was to design the bell tower, the Campanile, in Florence (1334-1337).

One of the major contributors to advancing art in the Renaissance was the tragic young painter Masaccio. His work included many "portraits" among the faces of his people, and he gave them a "true-to-life quality." And as Schaeffer tells us: "Nature had thus now truly come to its proper place." In addition to life like faces, Masaccio he brought central perspective to his works, was the first to bring light into his paintings from the right direction. Schaeffer summarizes Masaccio's contributions as "He painted so that his figures looked 'in the round' and in the midst of a realized space. One can feel the atmosphere about Masaccio's figures, this sense of true atmosphere being caused by the combination of perspective plus light. In addition, his work had real composition; there was a balance to the total work in the relationship of the figures and the whole."

We can recognize parallel developments taking place by Flemish painters in northern Europe especially in the works of Jan Van Eyck. In his works Van Eyck displays a mastery of light and air and he emphasizes nature. He also engaged in adding true portraits to his works yet he is likely best recognized for his landscape - he was the first master painter of the landscape. Perhaps his work "Adoration of the Lamb" is the most representative of his incredible talent. "It is an altarpiece containing wonderful pictures of Eve, Adam, and singing angels. But most impressive is the central theme: the rich, the poor - people of all classes and backgrounds - coming to Christ. And who is this Christ? Van Eyck comprehended the biblical understanding of Christ as the Lamb of God who died on the cross to take away the moral guilt of those who accept Him as Savior. But this Christ is not now dead. He stands upright and alive on the altar, symbolizing that He died as the substitute, sacrificed, but He now lives! As van Eyck painted this, almost certainly he had Jesus' own words in mind, as Christ speaks in the Apocalypse, the last book in the Bible: 'I am the living one that became dead, and behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and I have the keys of death and hades.' The background of this painting is marvelous, a real landscape." As his words reflect, certainly for Schaeffer,

and many others Van Eyck was a major influence in Renaissance art.

Let's turn for a moment from painting to literature. Even in literature we can see a positive drift toward the impact of nature. Schaeffer uses the specific example of Dante and his work "The Divine Comedy." Dante, a political exile, was one of the first writers to write in the "vernacular," writing in the dialect or common language of the area. Dante's works seemingly represent the influence of Aquinas. Dante continued the development of Humanism in the Renaissance by mixing the classical writings in with Christianity in his writings. Two examples of this are given by Schaeffer: "from The Divine Comedy: first, Dante's guide through hell is the Roman poet Virgil, who was to Dante what Aristotle was to Aquinas; second, the worst sinners in hell are Judas who betrayed Christ and Brutus and Cassius who betrayed Caesar."

Another writer, Petrarch, who is recognized as the father of "new" humanism, following in Dante's footsteps popularized his love for the classical Roman writers and a love for ancient Rome. Petrarch's translation of Homer has become known as a foundation stone of the Renaissance. "His translation of Homer was one of the foundation stones of the Renaissance, reviving Greek literature after 700 years of neglect."

It is from Petrarch that Schaeffer traces what has come to be called "professional humanists." "These paid men of letters translated Latin, wrote speeches, and acted as secretaries. They were largely laymen, like the Florentine chancellors Salutati (1331-1406) and Bruni (1370-1444). Their humanism meant, first of all, a veneration for everything ancient and especially the writings of the Greek and Roman age. Although this past age did include the early Christian church, it became increasingly clear that the sort of human autonomy that many of the Renaissance humanists had in mind referred exclusively to the non-Christian Greco-Roman world. Thus Renaissance humanism steadily evolved toward modern humanism - a value system rooted in the belief that man is his own measure, that man is autonomous, totally independent."

Even in architecture one can see a definite shift from gothic of the Medieval period to a return to classical influence. An example of this is found in the works of Brunelleschi. In 1421 he began the building the Foundling Hospital which is now known as the first Renaissance building. Brunelleschi's greatest work of architecture maybe his dome of the cathedral in Florence (1434) which combines a "great artistic triumph with an overwhelming feat of engineering."

Whatever artistic medium one chooses to look at in the Renaissance one sees that man is beginning to put himself at the center of everything. It is no accident that it was in this period that we first recognize self-portraiture, portraits, and with that autobiographies and biographies as man seeks to recognize man. It seems that after the death of Masaccio the Renaissance Period which had been sitting on the fence between emphasizing the importance of God or emphasizing the importance of man, leapt to land on the side of man. "Man made himself increasingly independent and autonomous, and with this came the loss of anything which gave meaning, either to the individual things in the world or to

man. With this we begin to see the dilemma of humanism which is still with us today." It even infected the way the Renaissance Man came to see the Medieval period. "The humanists of that time, under the enthusiasm for the classics, spoke of what had immediately preceded them as a 'Dark Age' and talked of a 'rebirth' in their own era. Harkening back to the pre-Christian era, they visualized man as taking a great forward leap. The concept of autonomous man was growing. In other words, humanism in the form it took in the Renaissance (and after the Renaissance) was being born."

Two men of the Renaissance stand above all others - Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci and it is in them that one can perhaps grasp a view of the ultimate conclusion of humanism for man.

Michelangelo was unequalled as a sculptor in the Renaissance and arguably no one has ever matched his talents. Two of his best-known works are in fact signature works for the Renaissance. The first work known simply as "Prisoners" is a work where men are depicted as tearing themselves out of rock. This is what Francis Schaefer has to say about this remarkable work: "They make a real humanistic statement: Man will make himself great. Man as Man is tearing himself out of the rock. Man by himself will tear himself out of nature and free himself from it. Man will be victorious."

The best-known work of Michelangelo and one of the five most significant works of art in the world is his statue called "David." The great irony of this magnificent sculpture is that it is created from a piece of marble that was considered to be so flawed that it was useless. Many have assumed from the name of the work that Michelangelo was referring to the Jewish King David the slayer of Goliath and as we are told by Schaeffer that wasn't it at all. "Michelangelo knew his Judaism, and in the statue the figure is not circumcised. We are not to think of this as the biblical David but as the humanistic ideal. Man is great!" It was indeed a bold statement of man - one that might even lead one to be reminded of the Tower of Babel. "The David was the statement of what humanistic man saw himself being tomorrow! In this statue we have man waiting with confidence in his own strength for the future. Even the disproportionate size of the hands says that man is powerful. This statue is idealistic and romantic . . . There was and is no man like the David. Humanism was standing in its proud self and the David stood as a representation of that."

The other giant of the Renaissance period was Leonardo da Vinci - the perfect Renaissance Man, the man who could do almost anything and does it better than most anyone else. As an inventor, an engineer, an anatomist, an architect, an artist, a chemist, a mathematician, he was almost without equal. It was perhaps his mathematics that lead da Vinci to come to his understanding of the ultimate meaning of Humanism. Leonardo is generally accepted as the first modern mathematician. He not only knew mathematics abstractly but applied it in his Notebooks to all manner of engineering problems. He was one of the unique geniuses of history, and in his brilliance he perceived that beginning humanistically with mathematics one only had particulars. He understood that man beginning from himself would never be able to

come to meaning on the basis of mathematics. And he knew that having only individual things, particulars, one never could come to universals or meaning and thus one only ends with mechanics. In this he saw ahead to where our generation has come: everything, including man, is the machine.”

Late in their lives both of these great figures of the Renaissance seemingly came to similar conclusions - that man starting with man could never get beyond man, man could never get from the particulars to the universal. Michelangelo and da Vinci, like all humanists “. . . had been sure that man starting from himself could solve every problem. There was a complete faith in man. Man starting from himself, tearing himself out of the rock, out of nature, could solve all. The humanistic cry was, ‘I can do what I will; just give me until tomorrow.’” As life drew to an end for these two great figures of the Renaissance they seemed to have reached the conclusion that the natural conclusion of humanism was not joy and victory in man accomplishments over nature but rather that “As a man thinketh so is he - and humanism had already begun to show that pessimism was its natural conclusion. Actually, we could say that we went to Renaissance Florence and found modern man!” - despondency, hopelessness, emptiness, valueless, without absolutes - Humanism and modern man have indeed been found - now what?