The Classical Renaissance

By Sir Richard C. Jebb

The Renaissance, in the largest sense of the term, is the whole process of transition in Europe from the medieval to the modern order. The Revival of Learning, by which is meant more especially the resuscitated knowledge of classical antiquity, is the most potent and characteristic of the forces which operated in the Renaissance. That revival has two aspects. In one, it is the recovery of a lost culture; in another, of even higher and wider significance, it is the renewed diffusion of a liberal spirit which for centuries had been dead or sleeping. The conception which dominated the Middle Ages was that of the Universal Empire and the Universal Church. A gradual decadence of that idea, from the second half of the thirteenth century to the end of the fifteenth, was the clearest outward sign that a great change was beginning to pass over the world. From the twelfth century onwards there was a new stirring of minds, a growing desire of light; and the first large result was the Scholastic Philosophy. That was an attempt to codify all existing knowledge under certain laws and formulas, and so to reconcile it logically with the one Truth; just as all rights are referable to the one Right, that is, to certain general principles of justice. No revolt was implied there, no break with the reigning tendencies of thought. The direct aim of the Schoolmen was not, indeed, to bind all knowledge to the rock of St Peter; but the truth which they took as their standard was that to which the Church had given her sanction. In the middle of the fourteenth century, when Scholasticism was already waning, another intellectual movement set in. This was Humanism, born in Italy of a new feeling for the past greatness of Rome. And now the barriers so long imposed on the exercise of the reason were broken down: not all at once, but by degrees. It was recognised that there had been a time when men had used all their faculties of mind and imagination without fear or reproof; not restricted to certain paths or bound by formulas, but freely seeking for knowledge in every field of speculation, and for beauty in all the realms of fancy. Those men had bequeathed to posterity a literature different in quality and range from anything that had been written for a thousand years. They had left, too, works of architecture such that even the mutilated remains had been regarded by legend as the work of supernatural beings whom heathen poets had constrained by spells. The pagan view was now once more proclaimed, that man was made, not only to toil and suffer, but to enjoy. And naturally enough, in the first reaction from a more ascetic ideal, the lower side of ancient life obscured, with many men, its better aspects. It was thus that Humanism first appeared, bringing a claim for the mental freedom of man, and for the full development of his being... .

This larger virtue of the Classical Renaissance, as educating a new capacity for culture in general, which came out in Italy only towards the close of the movement, was manifested in other countries almost as soon as they had been fully brought under the influences of the New Learning. . . . That capacity, once restored to the civilized world, became a part of the higher life of the race, an energy which, though it might be temporarily retarded here and there by reactionary forces, could not again be lost. Not in literature or in art alone, but in every form of intellectual activity, the Renaissance opened a new era for mankind.


Sir Richard Claverhouse Jebb was Regius Professor of Greek at Cambridge University from 1889 until his death in 1905.
ABOVE: Antonio Rossellino’s marble relief of the Madonna and Child, in the Altman collection, is one of the supreme renaissance sculptures in America, miraculously evoking through its delicate carving and accomplished design the sentiment and realism of quattrocento Florence.

OPPOSITE: Altarpiece painted by Raphael about 1505. It was said by Vasari to have been ordered for the Convento di Sant’ Antonio da Padova, in Perugia, and was sold piecemeal by the nuns of the convent in the seventeenth century. The Museum received the main panel of the Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saints and the lunette of God the Father and angels as a gift from J. P. Morgan in 1916. The small predella panel of the Agony in the Garden, once in the collection of Queen Christina of Sweden, was purchased from the Mackay collection in 1932.
LEFT: Raphael painted this portrait of Giuliano de' Medici, Duke of Nemours, a son of Lorenzo the Magnificent, about 1515. The almost sinister likeness set forth in this painting in the Bache collection may be contrasted with the more generalized impression given by the seated figure of Giuliano in the Medici Chapel in Florence, a sculpture by Michelangelo. RIGHT: This portrait of a young man, possibly a Duke of Urbino, is by Bronzino, a Florentine mannerist of the first half of the sixteenth century. It once belonged to Lucien Bonaparte, Prince of Canino, and came to the Museum in 1929 in the bequest of Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer.
Mantegna's Adoration of the Shepherds is considered an early work of this great North Italian master, painted before 1460. It came to light in the Rouse-Boughton-Knight collection in England in the 1880's and was later acquired for the Clarence H. Mackay collection. It was presented to the Museum as an anonymous gift in 1932.
ABOVE: This canvas of Veronese's has generally been titled Mars and Venus United by Love, but its subject is still a matter of considerable speculation among iconographers. The painting was in the collections of the Emperor Rudolf II, Queen Christina of Sweden, and the Dukes of Orléans, and was purchased by the Museum in 1910 with income from the Kennedy Fund.

OPPOSITE: Tullio Lombardo carved this life-size marble Adam in the late fifteenth century for the tomb of Doge Andrea Vendramin in the Venetian Church of the Servi. In the early nineteenth century this figure and a companion, Eve, were removed from the monument, because their nudity, to the faithful of that generation, appeared inappropriate in a church. Later the Adam passed into the possession of the Duchesse de Berry, a daughter-in-law of Charles X of France, and in 1936 it was acquired by the Museum with income from the Fletcher Fund.
ABOVE: This tapestry representing the Crucifixion was woven in Brussels in the early sixteenth century after a design by Bernart van Orley. Like many other of the finest renaissance hangings, it was apparently ordered for Spain. It figured in the historic sale of the collection of the Duke of Berwick and Alba in 1877 and came to the Museum in the Blumenthal collection in 1941.

OPPOSITE: This polychromed wood relief of the Holy Family is a spectacular example of Spanish renaissance sculpture. It may be dated in the mid-sixteenth century and appears to be the work of Diego Silöee, for it is closely related to his celebrated altarpiece in the “Capilla del Condestable” in the cathedral at Burgos. It is a recent bequest to the Museum from Helen Hay Whitney.
The Drowning of Britomartis, a tapestry designed by Jean Cousin, was made in Paris about 1550 for Diane de Poitiers's château d'Anet. It is a gift from the children of Mrs. Harry Payne Whitney.
The etched and gilded armor of Galiot de Genouilhac, Master of Artillery for Louis xii and Francis 1, was made in 1527 by French or Italian armorers. Its elements are so functionally designed that its helmet, after four centuries, recently served as a model for the protective head-gear worn in combat by American airmen. Rogers Fund and gift from William H. Riggs, 1917
The lovely Madonna and Child in painted terracotta on the left was once believed to be by Michelozzo but is now commonly accredited to the foremost sculptor of fifteenth-century Florence, Donatello. It has been classed among the master's late works. The Madonna and Child on the right, once in the famous Hainauer collection, is the work of Luca della Robbia, the founder of the Florentine dynasty of masters specializing in the art of glazing terracotta. Both reliefs are in the Altman collection.
Andrea del Verrocchio, like other of his colleagues in fifteenth-century Florence, was no bound slave to one particular art form. The two superb Madonna compositions by Verrocchio owned by the Museum—a terracotta relief (Rogers Fund, 1900) and a painted panel in the Altman collection—show him to have been equally the master of the techniques of sculpture and painting. These works by Verrocchio also show how the treatment of the same subject in different media inevitably leads an artist to different results.
The Rearing Horse, attributed to Leonardo da Vinci, is evidently a bronze cast of a model which this sculptor planned for the Trivulzio monument in Milan. The Self-Portrait by Peter Vischer, in the Bache collection, is an early sixteenth-century replica of a bronze figure on Vischer's principal work, the Shrine of Saint Sebald in Nuremberg.
Just as the Rospigliosi cup in the Altman collection (above) epitomizes Italian goldsmithery, the Wolff-Metternich chalice in the Morgan collection (left) represents a similar achievement in German work. The cup, which takes its name from a former owner, a Roman prince, is considered a rare work of the celebrated Florentine goldsmith of the High Renaissance Benvenuto Cellini. All the richness and elegance associated with his name are embodied in this famous piece. The chalice, lavishly enameled and jeweled to effect an equal splendor, bears the arms of the Wolff-Metternich family and is dated 1609.
ABOVE: This extraordinary carved and painted cabinet, or armoire, is in the manner of the Burgundian master Hugues Sambin. Its interior is decorated with paintings in the gay style of the School of Fontainebleau, and ciphers indicate that it was made in honor of the marriage of Orazio Farnese, Duke of Castro, with Diane de France in 1553. Purchase, Rogers Fund, 1925

OPPOSITE: The maiolica plate (above), bearing the arms of Matthias Corvinus, King of Hungary, and his wife, Beatrice of Aragon, was made in Faenza about 1476, the year of their marriage. Before its acquisition by the Museum (Fletcher Fund, 1946), it was in the Morgan and Schiff collections. The painted enamel of the Madonna and Child (below), showing the Child holding a Tau cross, was made in the early sixteenth century by Jean Pénicaud I of Limoges. It is one of a fine group of renaissance enamels exhibited in the Bache collection.
The wedding chest known as the Trebizond cassone is so called from the panel showing the conquest of that city by the Turks in 1461. Like much Florentine work of the late fifteenth century, it is strongly architectural in form. It was made for the Strozzi Palace in Florence, and in its end panels bears an impresa of the Strozzis. Purchase, Kennedy Fund, 1913
This room from the ducal palace at Gubbio was made about 1480 for Federigo Montefeltro, a famous Duke of Urbino, presumably after designs by Francesco di Giorgio. It is probably the only completely "authentic" period room in any museum, for its quattrocento furnishings were preserved for all time in the "trompe-l'oeil" perspective of its marquetry walls. Purchase, Rogers Fund, 1939
The Massacre of the Innocents, engraving by Marcantonio after Raphael. Gift of Felix M. Warburg and his family, 1941. The first professional reproductive engravers made Raphael known throughout Europe faster than any artist before him.
The Bacchanal with a Wine Press, engraving by Andrea Mantegna. Anonymous gift, 1929. Mantegna may have begun engraving in order to multiply his drawings, which were in great demand for teaching apprentices. Though all engravers before his time tended to niggle and facet like goldsmiths, he handled his graver like his pen or brush, clearing everything for mass and rhythm. In so doing, he linked Italian print-making forever with Italian painting.
Drawing by Titian. Rogers Fund, 1911. These two pages confront the two rival giants of the High Renaissance—Titian, perhaps the only painter whose supremacy has never been seriously disputed, and Michelangelo, whose dramatized anatomy still persists, after four centuries, in haunting the eye with a vision of forces clashing in momentary balance.
Drawing by Michelangelo for the fresco of the Libyan Sibyl in the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican. Pulitzer Fund, 1924. Here a woman's figure was evolved from a man's clearer anatomy.
ABOVE: Drawing by Filippino Lippi. Dick Fund, 1936. Italian painters often sketched from the nude during warm weather and painted from their sketches in the winter. This practice of painting from drawings, rather than direct from models, is one of the causes of clarity in Italian art.

OPPOSITE: Woodcut from Dante’s “Divine Comedy,” Brescia, 1487. Dick Fund, 1931. The Italians who first published the Classics led the world in printing and illustrating modern authors.
Masquerade costume, engraving by René Boyvin. Dick Fund, 1932. The renaissance Italians in Fontainebleau developed the first style that differed consciously from church art.
Woodcut of Erasmus by Holbein. Rogers Fund, 1922. Holbein, drawing as deftly as Erasmus wrote, recorded his friend in portraits that are classics of understanding.
Drawing by Leonardo da Vinci. Rogers Fund, 1917. In the mirror writing above the drawing Leonardo explains that the lizard is waking the sleeper threatened by the serpent. Leonardo drew other, similar mediaeval allegories that are also in this round form of an antique medallion. His many loyalties to antiquity and the Middle Ages have been overshadowed by our modern appraisal—perhaps overestimation—of his speculations as a pioneer of science.

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