

Preserving Classical Civilization

The two great civilizations of classical antiquity were ancient Greece and ancient Rome. Ancient Greece gave the world the poetry of Homer; the plays of Sophocles, Euripides, and Aeschylus; the histories of Herodotus and Thucydides; and the philosophical writings of Plato and Aristotle. The Greeks also produced beautiful sculptures and striking buildings like the Parthenon in Athens.

The Romans borrowed many ideas and techniques from the Greeks. They copied Greek statues and buildings, and created new structures like the Pantheon. They also created literary masterpieces of their own, including poetry by Virgil, Ovid, and Horace, and speeches by Cicero.

After the fall of Rome, some of the artistic and literary creations of classical culture survived, but others were lost. During the Middle Ages, Western Europe was broken up into small regions with economies based on agricultural labor. In most places there was little time for education and the arts. For the most part, only a few monks in monasteries had exposure to classical literature, and many of them knew Latin but not Greek. Although some Latin texts were still read (notably Virgil and Ovid), very few people were able to read Greek.

Some of the most significant advances in scholarship made during the Middle Ages were made by Islamic scholars. During the 600s and 700s, Muslims spread their religion across North Africa into the Iberian Peninsula, through the Middle East, and into the lands of the Byzantine Empire. Some of these areas had previously been conquered and governed by Alexander the Great, who exposed them to Hellenistic Greek culture and then by the Romans. The Muslim conquerors eventually came into possession of various Greek and Roman manuscripts. Rather than destroy these works, Muslim scholars carefully preserved them, translating them into Arabic, studying them, and in some cases building on ideas set down by the ancient writers in their own works. The Muslims were particularly interested in philosophic and scientific works. (Students who were in Core Knowledge schools in Grade 4 should have learned about significant Muslim contributions to learning during the Middle Ages, including Arabic numbers and algebra, as well as the achievements of particular scholars such as Ibn Sina, known in Europe as Avicenna.)

Jewish scholars in Muslim-held areas such as Spain and Egypt also studied and used Greco-Roman writings. One of the best known of the Jewish scholars was Maimonides, who lived in Cordoba, Spain, and Cairo, Egypt. Maimonides was a doctor and philosopher who tried to reconcile science and religion in his writings.

It was mainly through the efforts of these scholars that the works of the Greeks and Romans were preserved for later Europeans. Although artists and scholars were working in any number of Muslim cities (Baghdad, Constantinople, Timbuktu, Damascus, and Cairo, for example), the cities of Andalusia in southern Spain were especially rich centers of scientific work and artistic development. Scholars working in these cities translated works that had originally been written in Greek out of Arabic and into Latin. Over time, these Latin translations began to be studied at European universities that sprang up in the late Middle Ages, and Greek began to be studied again as well.

The Humanists

As European scholars learned more about the writings of the ancient Greeks and Romans, interest in the ancient world increased. Some people began to wish they could read Plato, Aristotle, and other classical authors in the original Greek. Others rummaged through monasteries looking for manuscripts of forgotten classical works. These scholars became known as humanists because they devoted their lives to studying the humanities and sought to find a balance between thinking about human virtues and actively participating in life. This focus on studying how to reform human culture and actively engaging in life's pursuits was an important hallmark of the humanist movement.

The humanists wanted to recover lost texts and establish the best text of a particular book by comparing various surviving copies. They wanted to study the classical writers and learn to write in an elegant classical style. Machiavelli, in the quotation cited on p. 171, gave voice to the mind of the humanist scholar.

One of the earliest and most important of the humanists was the Italian poet Francesco Petrarch. Petrarch was born in 1304 not far from Florence. He was a dedicated student of Latin literature and a talented poet. Petrarch wrote part of an epic poem in Latin on the Second Punic War (an episode from Roman history). Petrarch also commissioned the first translation of Homer's *Iliad* from Greek into Latin and wrote about the lives of famous people from the ancient world. He visited monasteries, searching for lost classical manuscripts. One of his greatest finds was a set of previously unknown letters by the Roman orator Cicero. In one of his most famous works, Petrarch imagines himself speaking with Saint Augustine, the great Latin writer and church father.

It was Petrarch as much as anyone who created the idea of the Renaissance as a historical period. He held that history could be divided into three ages: 1. the classical era, which Petrarch loved and admired; 2. the "Dark Ages," which he detested and saw as an age in which learning and the classics were forgotten or neglected; and 3. an age that later became known as the Renaissance, or rebirth of learning, which he encouraged. For Petrarch, this third age would be a period when classical works and ideals were rediscovered and the "darkness" lifted.

Although Petrarch's scheme was grossly unfair to the Medieval period, it outlined a way of looking at the world that most Renaissance humanists came to share.

Another great Italian humanist was Leon Battista Alberti (1404–1472). Born in Florence and given a good education, at age twenty he wrote a comedy in Latin that was so completely in the classical style that many people believed it was a classical piece that had been rediscovered. Later Battisti wrote an important treatise on art that helped Renaissance painters learn how to give an impression of depth on a flat surface. Alberti was also a talented architect who worked on many churches and buildings in the classical style in Florence and Rome. Because he was a master of so many arts, Alberti was later known as a “Renaissance Man.”