

Response to the Middle Ages

The term “Renaissance,” as it applies to the period falling after the Middle Ages, has a conflicted history. Technically, the term means “rebirth,” in this case, the rebirth or revival of classical antiquity. In the eighteenth century, art historians began using this term to refer to the classical features of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century painting, sculpture, and architecture. In the nineteenth century, the French historian Jules Michelet (1798-1874) used the term to refer to this period in aspects other than the arts. The idea of the Renaissance as a distinct time period, one beginning in Italy around 1350 and ending around 1650 after spreading to the rest of Europe, gained currency with the work of Swiss historian Jakob Burckhardt (1818-1897) with his 1860 *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*. Burckhardt’s work, like Michelet’s, extended the classicizing elements of the arts to the focus of intellectual life and politics. He examined leading figures, the functioning of states and political life, and the reconfiguration of society, concluding that all had distinctly modern characteristics in a way the preceding medieval centuries did not.

Yet, there were earlier movements that historians refer to with the term renaissance. There was the Carolingian Renaissance of the ninth century, in which learned culture and classical influences experienced a revival. There was the renaissance of the twelfth century, in which the rediscovery and availability of ancient Greek texts newly translated into Latin had a profound impact on education. This could be seen especially through the triumph of dialectic, based on the study of newly translated works of Aristotle, in the new institution of the university. Moreover, the Romanesque style of architecture, which hit its height in the eleventh century, was clearly a revival of classical forms, at least in its rounded arches. So then, what was so different about the Renaissance beginning in Italy in the mid-fourteenth century? There was much continuity between the preceding centuries and the period known as the Renaissance, despite the Italian poet Francesco Petrarca’s (1304-1374) characterization of everything between the classical period and his own times as the “Dark Ages.” While one can see the antecedents and partial expressions of key Renaissance characteristics in earlier centuries, the form they took in the period known as the Renaissance was distinct. The intellectual and educational movement known as humanism, of which the poet Francesco Petrarca was considered to be the father, relied on classical examples to guide study and outlook on life. Humanists took a pre-Christian value system, one based on worldly fame and glory, and incorporated it into their Christian world in way not done in earlier renaissances. They put man, his dignity, and the worthiness of human experience at the center of their thought, seeking models in classical literature to help one withstand the blows of fortune and to make good moral decisions. It was this shift in emphasis that distinguished Renaissance thought. This, along with the implications it had for later political and social developments, set the period between 1350 in Italy, around 1500 in other areas in Europe, and 1650 apart from the medieval period in Europe.