The Nature of Being - Views of Man During the Renaissance

There were few periods in history as philosophically and artistically revolutionary as the Renaissance. Starting in fourteenth-century Italy and spanning approximately three hundred years, this “rebirth” of art, humanism, and ideas had a great effect on society, and on the individual as well. A key component of the Renaissance was not only the rebirth of a culture, but a rebirth of one’s self. Naturally, many esteemed philosophers and writers recorded their own observations, thoughts, and beliefs concerning this idea. Some of the greatests thinkers of the Renaissance Period, while all brilliant men, focused on very different areas of man’s being and nature in their writings. Introspective thought, the ability of man to create amazing things, and observations of society are all prevalent themes in these writings.

Self-awareness, and the act of talking or writing about one’s self, was something completely foreign to most before the Renaissance age. However, this period, which sparked change in nearly every area of living, caused many to look within themselves for answers rather than to the outside world. A sudden urge to understand one’s self took hold of many. Some reconciled their newfound individualism with their faith. Giovanni Pico felt that man had been given by God the tools inside himself to be any type of person, to have any character, but that it is up to each person themselves to choose what kind of person they will ultimately become (Doc. 2). This idea would have seemed preposterous to many Christians earlier in history as it contradicted the idea of fate or predestination. However, it was a perfectly acceptable hypothesis in the Renaissance, just as introspective thought as a whole was more accepted. A religious leader during this time might have been pressed to answer many questions people previously had been too scared or uncaring to ask, and may have even seen some freethinkers turn from organized religion entirely.

Nicholas Copernicus, a scientist during the Renaissance, was also very introspective like Pico. Unlike Pico, however, Copernicus’ self-awareness stemmed not from a desire to understand man’s capabilities, but from a desire to discover truths of the universe (Doc 6). Rather than brashly declaring his own scientific conclusions without any self-doubt, Copernicus attempted to understand his own judgements and listened to the opinions of others as well. Such careful and critical introspective thinking, characteristic of this time period, led to some of the greatest theories and creations of mankind.

The age of the Renaissance saw many beautiful and brilliant new creations, both in the artistic and practical sense. The new focus on one’s self could be seen in many art pieces, which were created more as a form of self-expression rather than a duplicate of something that already existed in nature or the world. Emotional and sometimes violent scenes from the Bible were a popular subject for many paintings of this time. Michelangelo was a very famous painter and sculptor who illustrated such scenes and figures, and was praised by many for his accurate depictions of the human body. Pietro Aetino was one of these many who admired his style and expertise, and in a letter to Michelangelo he glorified his work, recognizing his greatness (Doc. 4). This newfound appreciation and celebration of the uniqueness of others was prevalent during the Renaissance. If a modern-day art student were to write a letter to Michelangelo, their address may not be as heartfelt or filled with as much excitement as Aetino’s, even though Michelangelo might be viewed with more respect as an artist now; his style of painting and portraying humanity was more revolutionary during his own time than it would be now.

Another observation of a great artist was written by Giorgio Vasari (Doc. 3). In this work, he described and lauded the many gifts and talents of Leonardo da Vinci, who had an affinity not only for art, but also for science and inventing. While Vasari does praise da Vinci for his talents, unlike Aetino, he also takes note of the wasted potential da Vinci exhibited. Vasari claims that if da Vinci has focused on completing projects in a certain area rather than starting many different endeavors in all sorts of areas, he might have had more to show at the end of his life. Ground-breaking artists like Michelangelo and da Vinci had to face many critics, but were also responsible for some of the most visually iconic pieces of the Renaissance.

The observation of others as well as one’s self was a common theme in many Renaissance writings, and has helped historians understand the lives of Renaissance people from many different points of view. Like historians today, Francesco Petrarch reveled in learning about and recounting events of the past. In one of his writings, he expressed his disdain with then modern-day society, even going to far as to say that he would have been born in an earlier time if not for one exception: the love of his dear friends (Doc. 5). A commentary on society such as the one written by Petrarch was not uncommon during the Renaissance age, and each man had his own views. Petrarch, while outwardly bitter and scornful to the “modern” man, is also introspective, like many, and realizes that he does enjoy the company of certain others.

Machiavelli’s writing exhibits none of the warmth of Petrarch’s; his observations on the habits of mankind and himself are cold and calculated. As a leader, Machiavelli is somewhat obsessed with the advantages of being loved or hated by one’s people. He comes to the conclusion in his writing that men are selfish creates, and that to trust someone is to be weak (Doc. 1). This brutal piece of literature shows that while there is a common focus on mankind during the Renaissance, it was honest writing which was not always optimistic or cheerful. Just as human nature is volatile and subject to change, so were most works produced during the Renaissance.

Observations of self, others, and the great works created by man were clearly key components of the Renaissance. This period in history was transformative not only because of the art, writing, and innovations that came out of it, but because it remolded the idea of what it meant to be human. New theories were discussed, flaws were acknowledged and accepted, and opinions were shared (for the most part) respectfully. It was truly a “rebirth” of humanity, and a rejuvenation of free thought and new ideas. Though man has made many more great changes since then, the Renaissance should always be recognized as the start of a new chapter of self-awareness, pride, and innovative thought.