

The Early Renaissance in Fifteenth-Century Italy

N EITHER A SCHOLAR WRITING A HISTORY OF FRANCE IN THIRTEENTH-century Paris nor a notary writing a contract in fourteenth-century Bruges could have imagined that he was living in a “middle” age; he only knew that his age followed the eras of the past. But intellectuals in fifteenth-century Italy thought of themselves as living in a *new* age, one that

was distinct from the immediate past. This consciousness of historical difference separates the thinkers of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries from their medieval forebears. These thinkers searched the past history, or medieval world, and asked what they could improve their culture by reviving the best features of antiquity that its Roman and Greek cultures. Their efforts, beginning in the fifteenth century in Italy, marked a cultural flowering of great significance for the history of Europe.

Fresh called the *rinascimento*, Italian for “rebirth,” the period and to be known by its French name, the *Renaissance*. Its origins and roots extend to as the rebirth of classical language, literature, and art. Modern historians have identified the Italian Renaissance as an early phase in the fifteenth century, and high Renaissance as a later period of exceptional achievement, and the Late Renaissance, which is primarily a chronological term. Neither the definition of the Renaissance as the early, middle, or late, nor the extension of the term, apply as a cultural or artistic renewal has come to apply, respectively, in Southern Europe, as we have seen in chapter 14. Scholars and writers did not have the same definition to describe

the new terms, though they did study the past. More significant was an economic and cultural expansion that resulted in far-reaching political and cultural achievements.

The rebirth of the cultural flowering in Italy, its emphasis on civic, political, and social skills came together in a new Italian that produced many of the characteristics of modern Europe as civilization. For the reasons, some scholars refer to this era as the “early modern period.” This cultural shift was fundamentally an intellectual one. The scholars of the fourteenth century, and the fifteenth century began to study texts from Greece and Rome both for their moral content and their style. They connected themselves to the *classical humanists*—the study of them as well as emphasizing their own, humanistic, literary, moral philosophy, and art forms. Although the vocabulary of approach, called humanism, aimed to create knowledge for practical use in the world—for lawyers, humanists, politicians, diplomats, and merchants. Humanist education shifted intellectual activity toward classical sources.

Humanist writings of ancient texts not only helped them have the type of a Latin address, but also stimulated the study of the great Greek thinkers such as Aristotle, Plato, Euclid, and Ptolemy. Humanist analytical approach and empirical observation encouraged new thinking in many fields, including mathematics and natural science. Thinking history might the importance of such thinkers, acting in the world to cover their

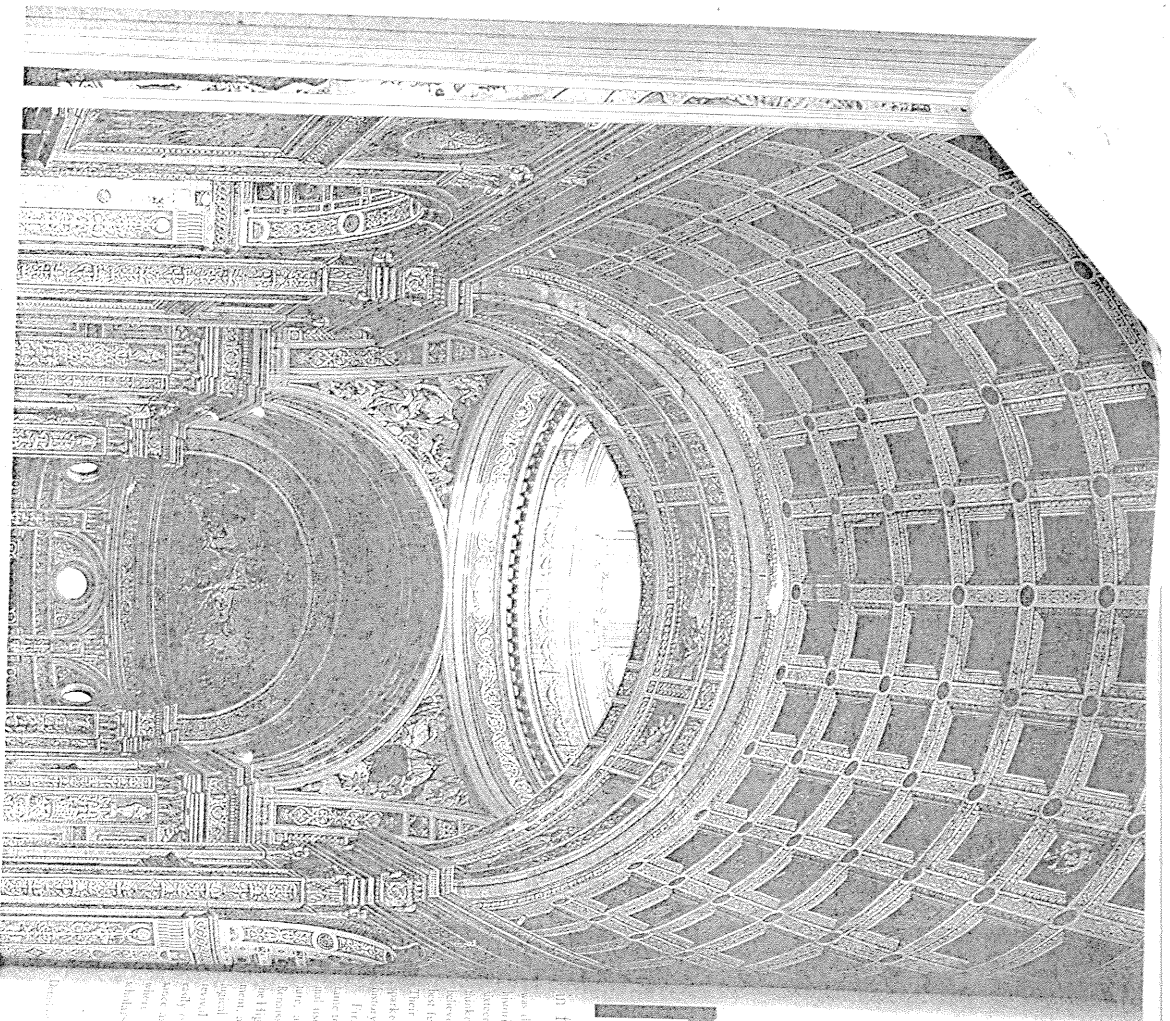


Illustration: Filippo Brunelleschi, Palazzo Medici-Riccardi, Florence, 1471

history. The first book consists largely of extracts from *Pliny* and *Varrone*; the second is about art in Italy in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and ends with an account of *Ghiberti's own work* (fig. 15.11).

Whereas all gifts of fortune are given and as easily taken back, but disciplines attached to the mind never fail, but remain fixed to the very end, . . . I give greatest and infinite thanks to my parents, who . . . were careful to teach me the art, and the one that cannot be tried without the discipline of letters. . . . Whereas therefore through parents' care and the learning of rules I have gone far in the subject of letters or learning in philology, and have the writing of commentaries, I have furnished my mind with these possessions, of which the final fruit is this, not to need any property or riches, and most of all to desire nothing. . . . I have tried to inquire how nature proceeds . . . and how I can get near her, how things seen reach the eye and how the power of vision works, and how visual . . . works, and how visual things move, and how the theory of sculpture and painting ought to be pursued.

In my youth, in the year of Our Lord 1401, I left Florence because of both the bad air and the bad state of the country. . . . My mind was



wanted each one to make a scene . . . [of] the sacrifice of Isaac. . . . These tests were to be carried out in a year. . . . The competitors were . . . Filippo di ser Brunellesco, Simone da Colle, Niccolò D'Arezzo, Jacopo della Quercia from Siena, Francesco da Valdimonte, Nicola Lamberti. . . . The palm of victory was conceded to me by all the experts and by all those who took the test with me. The glory was conceded to me universally, without exception. Everyone felt I had gone beyond the others in that time, without a single exception, with a great consultation and examination by learned men.

. . . The judges were thirty, four counting those of the city and the surrounding areas, the endorsement in my favor of the victory was given by all, and they by the consuls and board and the whole body of the merchants guild, which has the temple of St. John the Baptist in its charge. It was . . . determined that I should do this bronze door for this temple, and I executed it with great diligence. And this is the first work, with the frame around it, it added up to about twenty-two thousand florins.

FIGURE 15.11: Ghiberti's design for the bronze doors of the Florence Baptistery, 1401-17.

appears in the upper left and the fateshrouned angel on the right. At the center, Abraham gestures dramatically as he moves to sacrifice his son, bound and naked on an altar. Isaac twists to face the spectator, his beautifully formed torso contrasting with the cascade of drapery worn by his father. A wedge of mountain keeps other figures away from the main scene. Ghiberti's design successfully combines movement