



Map 15.1. Italy in the Renaissance

personal fame, yet also encouraged educated people to serve the common good by participating in civic life. Humanist educational ideas spread quickly throughout Italy, aided by the introduction into Italy of the printing press in 1464, which made books more widely available. Governing parties throughout Italy, whether princes, popes, or elected councils, used humanists in their bureaucracies and courts to conduct their business. Humanist ideas affected artists as well as the patrons who hired them. As humanists studied ancient texts, artists studied ancient artworks, not just to imitate details or motifs, but to understand the principles by which ancient buildings were designed and ancient sculptures achieved their naturalism. Renaissance artists took up the ancient ideal of rivaling nature in their art, but they brought their practical skills to this intellectual aim. They devised techniques such as perspective and mastered new technologies like oil painting and printmaking to further their goal of reproducing the natural world and to spread their ideas.

Artists used these ideas and techniques to make art that served spiritual and dynamic functions for their patrons. Medieval institutions—religious orders, guilds, and the Church—commissioned churches, architectural sculpture, wall

paintings, altar furnishings, and other objects as they had in earlier centuries, though secular patronage increased. The artists earned personal glory along the way, so that by the end of the century the status of the artist had changed. Through much of the Middle Ages, the social and economic position of artists in society was comparable to any other artisan. They were respected for the skill of their hands, but not considered intellectuals. Many artists in fifteenth-century Italy behaved like intellectuals, investigating the past and solving problems scientifically, so the status of the artist rose as a result.

During this period, there was no single political entity called Italy. Regions of different size and political organization competed with each other economically and often on the battlefield. The Kingdom of Naples in the south was a monarchy. Dukes, princes, and despots carved up northern Italy into city-states, including Milan, Mantua, and Urbino. The pope returned to Rome from Avignon to reclaim control of the papal states. And the major trading cities of Venice and Florence formed republics, where mercantile elites controlled political power. Though the cultural flowering we call the Renaissance occurred throughout Italy, for many modern scholars the city of Florence was its birthplace.

In Praise of the City of Florence

by Leonardo Bruni

Though born in Arezzo, Leonardo Bruni (1374–1444) moved to Florence to seek up law and humanistic studies. His mentor, Coluccio Salutati, was the Chancellor of Florence, to which poet Bruni succeeded in 1406. An ardent admirer of Classical literature, he modeled his own writings on those of Greek and Roman authors. He wrote this panegyric to Florence after the death of Giangaleazzo Visconti, which ended the threat to the city from Milan.

Therefore, what ornament does this city lack? What category of endeavor is not fully worthy of praises and grandeur? What about the quality of the foreigners? Why are they not the descendants of the Roman people? What about glory? Florence has done and daily continues to do great deeds of honor and virtue both at home and

FLORENCE, CA. 1400–1430. ANCIENT INSPIRATIONS FOR ARCHITECTURE AND ARCHITECTURAL SCULPTURE

One reason for the prominence of Florence in histories of the Renaissance is that many early humanists were Florentines who patriotically praised their hometown. Florence was an important manufacturing center, a key center for trade, and a major center for international banking, whose wealth and social dynamism attracted talented individuals. Instead of hereditary aristocrats, bankers and merchants controlled the government. Groups of merchants and artisans banded together in guilds (economic and social organizations) to strengthen their positions. The governing council, called the *Signoria*, consisted of officials elected from members of the guilds and prominent mercantile families. The government was a republic, a word that for Florentines signaled their identity as the heirs of the ancient Roman Republic.

Florentine politicians, such as Coluccio Salutati and Leonardo Bruni, chancellors in succession to the *Signoria*, gave eloquent voice to Florentine aspirations. Urging the city to defy the Duke of Milan as he threatened to invade in 1401–1402, Salutati called on the city's Roman history as a model to follow. After this threat had passed, Leonardo Bruni declared that Florence had been able to defy Milan because of her republican institutions, her cultural achievements, and the origins of her people. In his *Praise of the City of Florence* (1403–1404), he compared Florence's virtues to those of fifth-century Athens, which had defied the invading Persians. Yet he also praised Florentine piety and devotion, expressed in the building of churches. (See *Primary Source*, above.) Renaissance humanists wished to reconcile the lessons of antiquity with their Christian faith.

Bruni's words may explain why practical Florentines invested so much of their wealth on cultural activity. The *Signoria* and groups delegated by it commissioned numerous public projects to beautify and improve their city. Not only did individuals or families sponsor public projects, but so did

abroad. What about the splendor of the architecture, the cleanliness, the wealth, the great population, the health and pleasure of the site? What more can a city desire? No! What, therefore, should we say now? What remains to Nothing other than to venerate God on account of His grace and to offer our prayers to God. Therefore, our Al Everlasting God, in whose churches and at whose altars y rines worship most devoutly; and you, Most Holy Mother this city has erected a great temple of fine and glimmer where you are at once mother and purest virgin kneeling sweet son; and you, John the Baptist, whom this city has its patron saint—all of you, defend this most beautiful and di city from every adversity and from every evil.

SOURCE: TRANSLATED BY THE CENTER FOR RENAISSANCE STUDIES, UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN. THE ORIGINAL TEXT IS IN ITALIAN AND FRENCH. TRANSLATED BY JAMES H. COOPER, 1978.

merchant guilds who held competitions among arts commissions. The successful accomplishment of great visibility enhanced the prestige of sponsoring groups and drew artists to the city. Many (daughters were forbidden entry to the guilds, so they became artists) became sculptors, painters, and so on. In addition to the competitions for work at the Bag Duomo, awarded to Lorenzo Ghiberti and Brunelleschi, the guilds commissioned sculpture patron saints for the exterior niches of the center structure called *Or San Michele*. Among the artists the niches were Donatello and Nanni di Banco.

The Baptistery Competition

Andrea Pisano's bronze doors for the Baptistery completed in 1366, were an impressive example of taste and piety. Their success inspired the overworks at the Baptistery. The Guild of Wool Merchants another competition for a second set of bronze doors. A competitor was asked to make a design on the Sacrifice of Isaac; six artists made trial reliefs for this tion, though only two of them survive. One is Brunelleschi; the other is by Lorenzo Ghiberti (whom the Guild ultimately chose to execute the set of the Baptistery (fig. 15.1). Ghiberti left a description written late in his life. (See *Primary Source*, page 596.) Ghiberti's trial relief reveals the strength of his tion, his skill at rendering the human form, and his inherited from Andrea Pisano's first doors for the (see fig. 13.15), and presented certain design challenge could be fill the four lobes of the quarterfoil, yet narrative succinctly and naturalistically? Ghiberti problem by placing narrative details in the marginal focal point at the center. Thus, the rain on the