

4 Raphael painted this Renaissance mural, *The School of Athens*, around 1510 C.E.

The Renaissance Begins

28.1 Introduction

Toward the end of the Middle Ages, a great flowering of culture called the **Renaissance** began in Italy and spread throughout Europe. In this chapter, you will learn what the Renaissance was and how it began.

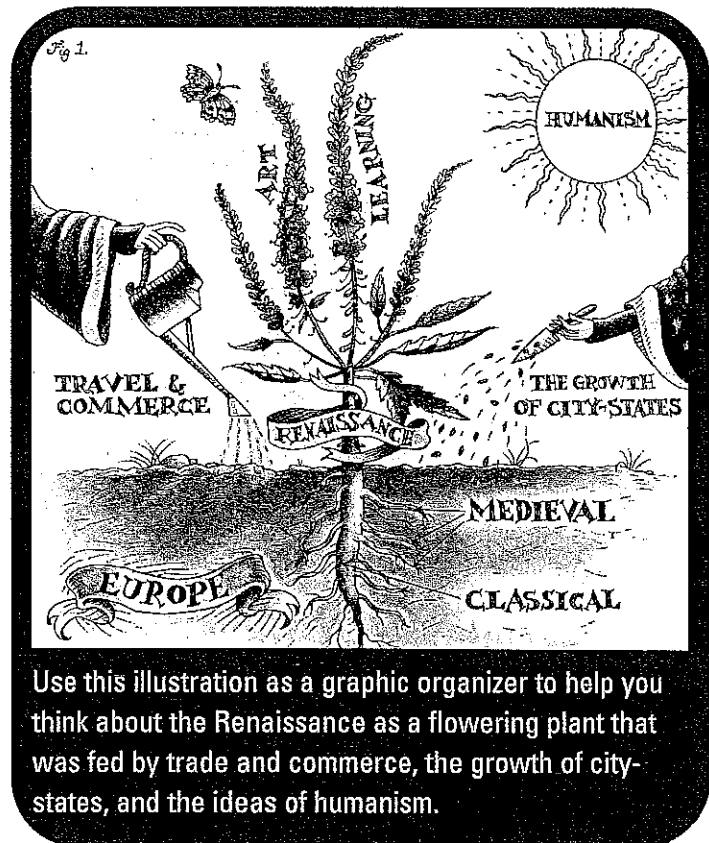
Renaissance is a French word that means “rebirth.” The Renaissance got its name from a rebirth in interest in **classical art** and **learning** that took place from the 1300s through the 1500s C.E. (*Classical* refers to the cultures of ancient Greek and Rome.) Although there was no sudden break with the Middle Ages, the Renaissance changed many aspects of people’s lives over time.

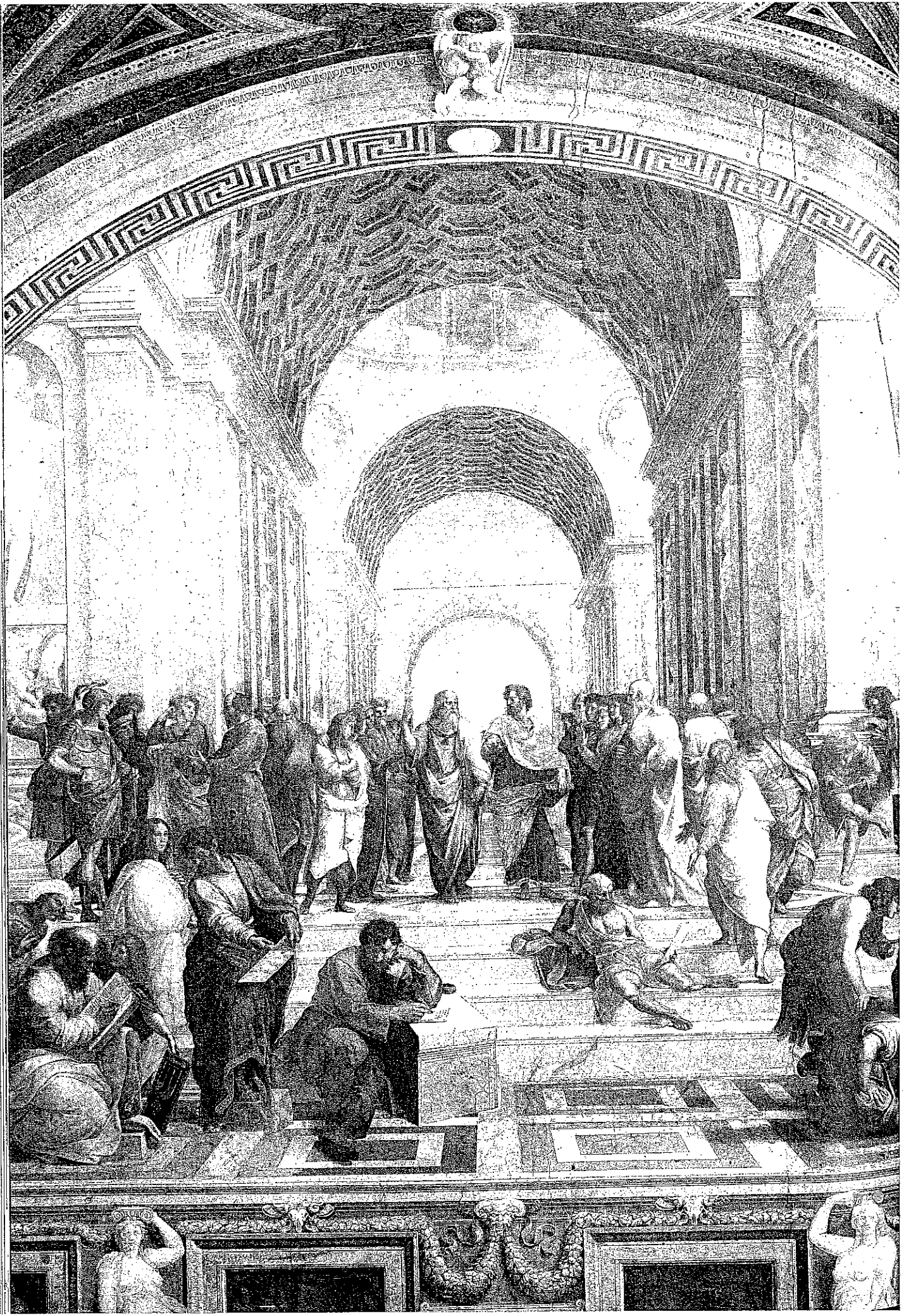
You may recall from Unit 1 that medieval European society was based on feudalism. Most people lived on feudal manors in the countryside. The Roman Catholic Church encouraged people to think more about life after death than about daily life on Earth. Except for the clergy, few people were educated.

By the Late Middle Ages, changes were occurring that helped pave the way for the Renaissance. Trade and commerce increased, and cities grew larger and wealthier. Newly wealthy merchants and bankers supported the growth of the arts and learning. A renewed interest in classical culture started a flood of new ideas. Greek and Roman examples inspired new styles of architecture, new approaches to the arts, and new ways of thinking.

Beginning in Italy, a philosophy called **humanism** developed. Humanists believed in the worth and potential of all individuals. They tried to balance religious faith with belief in the power of the human mind. Humanists took a fresh interest in human society and the natural world. This way of thinking contributed to the burst of creativity during the Renaissance.

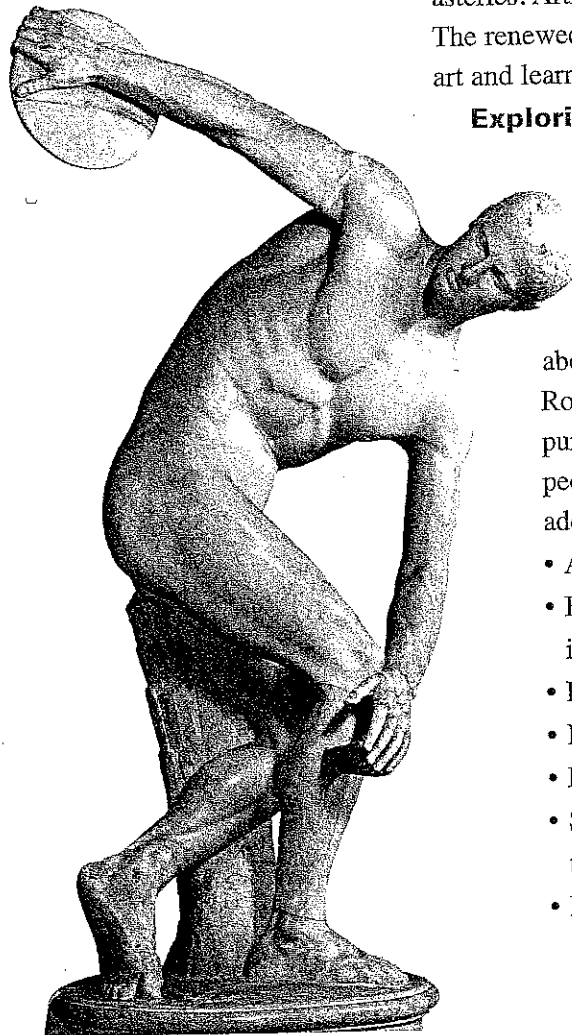
In this chapter, you’ll explore how the Renaissance differed from the Middle Ages and classical times. Then you’ll look at some changes in European life that led to the Renaissance.





perspective the appearance of distance or depth on a flat surface, as in a painting

This example of classical art was created in 450 B.C.E. A Roman statue of a discus thrower, it celebrates the classical ideals of balance and power.



28.2 What Was the Renaissance?

The Renaissance began in Italy in the mid 1300s and spread to other parts of Europe in the 1400s and 1500s. Let's look more closely at this "great rebirth" of interest in classical art and learning. Then we'll use art to explore the link between the Renaissance and the classical world.

Renewed Interest in the Classical World The Renaissance began with the rediscovery of the classical world of ancient Greece and Rome. After the fall of Rome in the fifth century C.E., classical culture was never entirely forgotten. The Roman Catholic Church helped keep knowledge of ancient times alive by copying documents that survived from the classical period. Still, this knowledge reached relatively few people during most of the Middle Ages.

In the Late Middle Ages, merchants and crusaders brought back goods and ideas from the East, including classical learning that had been preserved in the Byzantine Empire. Europeans also read classical works that came to them by way of Muslim scholars.

This flow of ideas led to a rediscovery of Greek and Roman culture. Scholars started collecting and reading ancient manuscripts from monasteries. Artists and architects studied classical statues and buildings. The renewed interest in classical culture led to the great flowering of art and learning that we call the Renaissance.

Exploring the Rebirth of Classical Ideas Through Art

We can trace the link between the classical world and the Renaissance by looking at art. Let's explore some of the characteristics of art from classical, medieval, and Renaissance times.

Classical Art The classical period lasted from about 500 B.C.E. to 500 C.E. The classical artists of Greece and Rome created sculptures, pottery, murals, and mosaics. The purpose of much of their art was to show the importance of people and leaders, as well as gods and goddesses. Here are additional characteristics of classical art:

- Artists valued balance and harmony.
- Figures were lifelike but often idealized (more perfect than in real life).
- Figures were nude or draped in togas (robes).
- Bodies looked active, and motion was believable.
- Faces were calm and without emotion.
- Scenes showed either heroic figures or real people doing tasks from daily life.
- In paintings, there was little background or sense of **perspective** (for example, showing people and objects bigger or smaller to make them look closer or farther away).

Medieval Art The medieval period lasted from about 500 to 1300 C.E. Medieval artists created stained glass windows, sculptures, illuminated manuscripts, paintings, and tapestries. The purpose of much medieval art was to teach religion to people who could not read or write. Here are additional characteristics of medieval art:

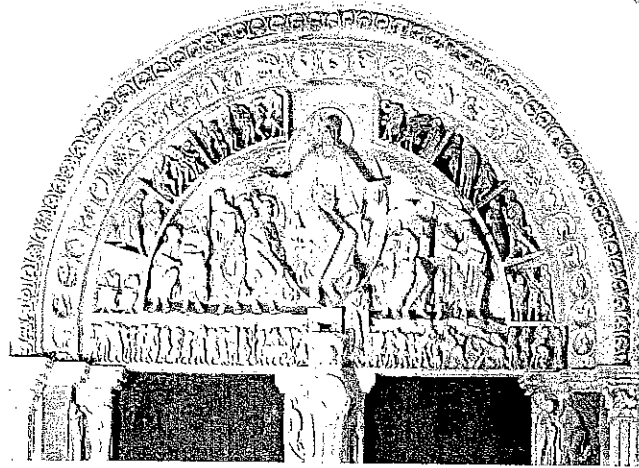
- Most art was religious, showing Jesus, saints, people from the Bible, and so on.
- Important figures in paintings were shown as larger than others around them.
- Figures looked stiff, with little sense of movement.
- Figures were fully dressed in stiff-looking clothing.
- Faces were serious and showed little feeling.
- Painted figures were two-dimensional, or flat.
- Paint colors were bright.
- Backgrounds were mostly one color, often gold.

Renaissance Art The Renaissance lasted from the 1300s to the early 1600s. Renaissance artists created sculptures, murals, drawings, and paintings. The aim of much Renaissance art was to show the importance of people and nature, not just religion. Here are additional characteristics of Renaissance art:

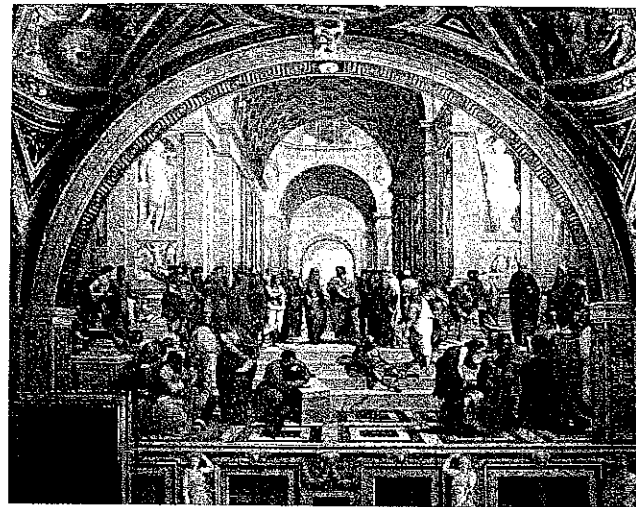
- Artists showed religious and nonreligious scenes.
- Art reflected a great interest in nature.
- Figures were lifelike and three-dimensional, reflecting an increasing knowledge of anatomy.
- Bodies looked active and were shown moving.
- Figures were either nude or clothed.
- Scenes showed real people doing everyday tasks.
- Faces expressed what people were thinking.
- Colors were shown responding to light.
- Paintings were often symmetrical (balanced, with the right and left sides having similar or identical elements).
- Full backgrounds showed perspective.

If you compare these lists, you can see that Renaissance artists were inspired more by classical art than medieval art. Like classical artists, Renaissance painters and sculptors depicted subjects that were not always religious. They tried to show people as lifelike and engaged in everyday activities. They also tried to capture the way things look in the real world.

Renaissance art reflects a rebirth of interest in the classical world. What changes brought about this revival of classical culture? Let's find out.



This example of medieval art was created for a church in France in 110 C.E. The sculpture shows Jesus sending his apostles out to preach.



This example of Renaissance art is a mural titled *The School of Athens*. It was painted by Raphael around 1510. Ancient Greek philosophers, such as Plato and Aristotle, are shown surrounded by some of the Renaissance artists they inspired centuries later.