

READING #5

Renaissance

The expansion of trade, as well as the growth of an agricultural surplus in Western Europe, led to a revival of interest in learning and the arts. In addition, a growing middle class with access to money was able to patronize craftspeople and teachers. The *Renaissance* was characterized by a revival of interest in classical Greek and Roman literature, art, civic virtue, culture. Scholars recovered and studied decaying manuscripts and wrote secular literature. Part of the Renaissance was *humanism*, the focus on individuals rather than God. Humanists focused on education and reform. For example, handbooks of behavior flourished in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, as people began to consider not only their place in heaven but also their place in the world. Cultural changes in the Renaissance, such as the increased use of vernacular language, propelled the rise of powerful monarchies, the centralization of governments, and the birth of nationalism. (Test Prep: List some of the elements of classical

Southern Renaissance In the city-states of Italy and in Spain, the focus of the Renaissance was still clearly under Church domination and patronage. For example, the writer *Dante Alighieri* (1265–1321) used a religious framework for *The Divine Comedy*, which features hell, purgatory, and heaven. Nevertheless, the inquiring spirit of the Renaissance is apparent in Dante's reverence for pagan writers, fearlessness in his criticism of corrupt Church officials, and, most important, his use of the Italian vernacular rather than Latin.

The Renaissance popes were the patrons of famous artists of the Renaissance, and many of the most important sculptures and paintings have religious subjects. As the Renaissance in the south continued until the sixteenth century, a close connection with the Church remained, even as secular thought grew.

Northern Renaissance By 1400, the Renaissance spirit was established in northern Europe as well, where there was great emphasis on piety among *lay people*, those who were not members of the clergy. At the same time, there was an increasing interest in understanding the physical world. *Geoffrey Chaucer*, writing in *The Canterbury Tales* in the late 1300s, portrayed a microcosm of middle-class occupations in England, including several Church positions. His social satire of monks who loved hunting and overly sentimental nuns provided an example of humanism in that Chaucer focused on worldly secular life while still acknowledging the importance of the Church and occupations connected with it. Like Dante a century earlier, Chaucer chose a vernacular, Middle English, for this work, although many of his other writings were in Latin.

