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Excerpt from *Bildung* by Dietrich Schwanitz

translated by Vivien Marx

The Modern Era

Renaissance

Renaissance means rebirth. The term was coined by Giorgio Vasari in 1550, who used it in his book describing the lives of major Italian artists. What he meant by this word was the revival of pagan culture of classical antiquity after the long sleep of the Middle Ages. This Renaissance found its expression in architecture, sculpture and painting and created the magnificent Italian cities we still admire today.

This was no coincidence: the vibrant cultural awakening was about pleasure on earth, a celebration of sensuality, colors, light, the beauty of the human body. It was man returning from the heavens to discover paradise on earth. It was a paradise of shapes and colors. And this discovery set off a fever of sorts. The Renaissance celebrated itself, as over-the-top and excessive and sought expression wherever the senses mattered: in architecture and painting.

What timeframe are we talking about? Usually the Renaissance is described as having lasted about 130 years from 1400 to 1530.

What set off this celebratory awakening?

This was the beginning of modern economy pushing out feudalism with the following outcome: Instead of becoming a feudal kingdom, Italy developed into a network of city-states. So where did the money come from?

The trade routes to the Orient run through Italy. Artisans and the textile industry too could benefit from the capital that was thus amassed and which created an influential bourgeoisie.

The taxes levied on Christian Europe by the church pour continuously into Rome where the popes begin to expand the city as of 1450 and in the process employ more artists than any other previous era. Attempts to tap and completely drain the Christian hemisphere in order to build St. Peter's Basilica unleash the Reformation (1517).

Due to this explosive growth of the money economy, Italy becomes the cradle of the banking and credit business (many expressions used in banking are of Italian origin such as account, bankrupt, credit etc.). The banking capital is Florence. The family that owns the largest bank also becomes the ruling family in Florence: the Medici.

As the Medici steered the city's affairs, Florence grew to become the new Athens and was the cradle of the Renaissance. The literary precursors of the Renaissance came from Florence and Arezzo respectively. They created literary Italian and assured that Italian is today's language in Florence: Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio

Dante offered a synthesis of the concept of the world for the Middle Ages. With his description of Hell, Purgatory and Paradise in his Divine Comedy he created a cosmology with a moral order in which every reward and punishment held its proper place.

With his *Sonnets to Laura*, Petrarch invented modern love poetry

Boccaccio and his Decameron created the example for the novella and set a standard for the sexual freedoms characteristic of the Renaissance.

In 1439 a council was assembled in Florence to unify the Catholic and the Greek Orthodox churches, which brought a large number of Greek scholars to Florence. When the Turks conquered Byzantium and crushed the Eastern Empire, many Greek scholars escaped to Florence. And that added to Florence becoming engulfed in a fever of humanism. Humanists were scholars who topped each other in their passion for the Greek and Latin texts of antiquity. And thus the literature of classical antiquity grew to become the new ideal style. This in turn led to the following rediscoveries:

Seneca on tragedy

Plautus and Terence on comedy

the Greek and Roman historians from Herodotus and Thucydides to Livy and Sallust

in poetry Horace, Catull and Ovid

in philosophy mainly Plato (Aristotle had already reigned in the Middle Ages). Florence experienced a Platonic Renaissance and a Platonic Academy was re-founded. The concept of platonic love was seen as having major importance. (→Socrates;→Botticelli)

Before the Medici came to power in Florence there had been a quasi-democracy with parties stuck in constant quarrels and struggles. Because of that heritage, it was thought that it help those seeking powers if they to assured the goodwill of the citizenry through various lavish expenditures , arts patronage and commissioning and to secure power by contracting large public projects. That led to

--the Medici becoming the greatest arts patrons in all of history and this activity triggered the Renaissance in Florence;
 --the fact that most of the artists first came from Florence;
 --the situation that other rulers realized that their insecure posts of power could be legitimized by general displays of splendor, by commissioning public buildings, and setting up symbolic state theaters.

After many wars and conquests a group of five city-states emerged that were more powerful than the others. In each of these regions illegitimate leaders had putsched themselves into power with the help of cunning, malice and money. The normal course of affairs was to ascertain political support through presents of various sums of money and nepotism. That created, just as in today's parties, large networks of clientele (of cliques and connections of various types) that permitted the rulers to stabilize their regimes and grow their dynasties. The five most powerful city-states were:

--Florence: the Medici were in power here.

--Milan: where the Sforza were in control.

--the Papal States: where the popes reigned supreme; but their methods to obtain power were the same as elsewhere: If you wanted to be elected Pope you had to blackmail the Cardinals who elected him. One pope from the Borgia family (his daughter was Lucrezia Borgia) was quite the family man and tried building a dynasty of this kind of his own.

--Venice: there was no dynasty here but an oligarchy (a governance of a few). A number of senatorial families created a council that elected a doge as the ruler (Venetian for Duce=leader). The government set up a very efficient secret police; and thus Venice became one of Italy's most stable powers (and most wealthy) and survived long after the others had crumbled.

--Naples became an urban kingdom that included all of southern Italy. The French House of Anjou and the Aragon fought over it. That led the way for the foreign involvement in Italy (France, Spain, the Emperor), the fall of the free city-states (with the exception of Venice) and the end of the Renaissance in the 16th century. Naples actually played a minor role in all of these events.

The centers were Florence, Rome, Venice and Milan. And then there were small sub-centers such as Ferrara, where the Este family ruled, Mantua with the Da Feltres and the court of Urbino where a certain Baldassare Castiglione wrote an influential book on etiquette, with good behavior recommendations for the courtier of the Renaissance: *Il Cortegiano* (The Book of the Courtier). This book held great sway throughout Europe.

These city-states became what you could essentially call a 150-year long art contest. The contestants were:

Sandro Botticelli of Florence (1444-1510)

He received his commissions from the Medici. Two of his paintings have become modern icons (works of cult status). The first one is *The Birth of Venus*: The Goddess rises out of the frothy sea standing on a shell and clothed only by her long blond hair. The other painting is an allegorical vision (allegory=a visual representation of a concept), called *La Primavera*, or spring. Since Florence is the city of Platonism, *La Primavera* is an allegory of platonic love. Here is a bit of an interpretation. Zephyr, the wind, nears from the right as he exales the breath of a god; and hugs the nymph Clori and fills her with spirit in a copulatory act. This causes Clori to transform herself into the figure next to her: Flora who in turn refers to the central figure who has given the painting its name: Primavera. In its entirety this is also a love painting. The sky passionately turns its attention toward the earth and brings on spring. In contrast to that, on the left side of the painting, Mercury, the mediator between Heaven and Earth, directs his attention toward the skies. Between him and the central figure of Primavera are the three Graces, Venus, Juno and Athena who represent beauty, harmony and wisdom. They have joined their hands to either float above their heads or join together lower, across their thighs and yet the ones in the center garner attention and they are placed exactly at eye level. Together , the linked hands symbolize the path of the spirit. This is the platonic cycle of the spirit flooding the earth and returning to the heavens creating a kind of cosmological eroticism. All of this makes you realize that in order to understand the paintings of the Renaissance you need to know Greek mythology, philosophy and of course the personnel of love.

Leonardo da Vinci of Vinci (near Empolia, 1452-1519)

He probably painted the world's most famous painting, the Mona Lisa (which is on display in the Louvre in Paris). He most clearly embodied the ideal of the Renaissance man, a universal genius. He was an architect, an inventor of devices and weapons, an accomplished draftsman, a tireless natural scientist, an engineer full of ideas and an ingenious painter. He designed costumes and jewelry, painted frescoes and portraits, laid out aqueducts for the city, devised bathrooms, painted horse stables and also created images of the Virgin Mary as well as altars. In Milan he painted one of his most famous works: The Last Supper. It shows the apostles in the moment when Christ says to them, "One of you will betray me today." Then Leonardo traveled on to Florence and where he accepted a contest against his rival Michelangelo. Leonardo painted a fresco on one wall of a large room and Michelangelo painted on the other. Leonardo lost the bet because his colors ran. He spent three years (1503-1506) with the wife of Francesco del Giocondo coming to his studio in order for him to capture her woeful smile and the puzzling facial expression on his canvas. He requested musicians attend these sessions as well who appeared to have increased her woefulness. And he thus managed to paint the most famous smile in art history. People have shot themselves in fits of hysteria in front of this painting. Oxford scholar Walter Pater thought that her face mirrors humanity's entire experience. Maybe the Gioconda, who has become more popular under the name Mona Lisa, was smiling with irony about one of the painter's secrets: He was homosexual and had a quirk that Freud was extremely interested in: he was unable to finish a painting. He kept the Mona Lisa under the pretext that she was not finished. Leonardo was a man of great strength, he could bend a horseshoe with his bare hands, knew how to ride and to fight with his sword, clothed himself elegantly, wrote in a special way from right to left, loved curiosities and was himself an eternally curious man. In his observations, he remained detached and could thus capture the grotesque, the ugly and the beautiful. All dynamic phenomena held great fascination for him, eddies in the water, clouds, mountains, rocks, creeper plants, emotions and air currents. He was always preoccupied with the idea of flying. He designed or constructed various flying machines, parachutes, a roller, a universal screwdriver, a mortar gun, a submarine and a steam-powered gun. He studied thermodynamics, acoustics, optics, mechanics and hydraulics, compared human and animal anatomy and completed countless drawings of the inner organs, blood vessels and nerve fibers. He was one of the most universally talented people to ever have lived and is perhaps only comparable to Leibniz or Goethe.

Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1564)

Michelangelo's decisive career leap was most dramatic. As an apprentice he was chiseling away at a faun when Lorenzo Medici passed by and critically inquired how such an elderly faun could have such a perfect set of teeth. Michelangelo banged at the faun's mouth with a hammer and struck out a single tooth. Lorenzo was enthusiastic about this combination of hot-blooded nature and skill and he invited him into his household. Michelangelo got into a fight there and got his nose broken in the process. After that he went to Padua and Rome where he created the marble *Pietà* (a grieving Mary holds the dead Christ across her lap), returned to Florence where he struggled with a block of marble from which he liberated the sculpture of David (there is a copy in front of the Palazzo Vecchio and the original is at the Academy of the Arts in Florence - a must see) and then Pope Julius II requested he paint the *Sistine Chapel*. Lying on his back supported by a scaffold he drew the famous scenes from the Old Testament, the Creation of Adam, as the Father stretches out his right hand, and creates Adam as he touches his limp finger; the Temptation and Fall of Adam and Eve; Noah's drunkenness; and many more Old Testament subjects which he renders not only prophetically, artistically but as a painting with the quality of a sculpture. Michelangelo infuses into his rendition of the Book of Genesis the energy of his own creative power, dynamism, the forces that lead to the birth of the world and the passions that are expressed in the bodies of the people he painted. There are approximately 50 female and male nudes in the Sistine Chapel but there are no landscapes and no plants. Everything is the expression of athletic power; Michelangelo's muscular bodies are not only sensual but also powerful. As a painter he was a sculptor and as a sculptor he was a painter. For four years Michelangelo worked on the ceiling painting in constant dispute with the Pope who always pressured him to show him the work or he would dismantle the scaffold. When he refused, the Pope threatened to have him thrown off the scaffold. When he finally did see it, he gave himself permission to die. He had seen the most magnificent work of art ever created. Michelangelo did without picturesque elements, anything decorative, or ornamental, the landscapes, the arabesques, architectural backdrops and concentrated just on the human bodies. His images breathed the spirit of the Old Testament or of the new Protestantism. They are foreboding figures, untypical for the Renaissance, which is why Michelangelo became one of that era's most famous artists. When he worked, he was possessed with the task at hand. He neglected himself, slept fully clothed. After completing the Sistine Chapel he had aged prematurely. He still lived to be almost 90 years old.

Titian (1477 or around 1487/90-1576)

He perhaps grew to be even older than that, perhaps close to 100 years old, but his date of birth is uncertain. He resided not in Florence but Venice. In general he was Michelangelo's complete opposite. He was perhaps the most representative painter of the Renaissance. His specialty was the portrayal of female beauty—he painted many Venuses and Aphrodites and the Virgin Mary as if she were Venus. In his work you see nothing of Michelangelo's protest against the world and nothing about the darker sides of life. Everything is color, light and sensual pleasure. He was the

unsurpassed master of nuance in coloring and portrayal of light. Besides women, his second specialty was painting splendid portraits. Because of the steely quality of his paintings he was commissioned to paint the great leaders of the world and painted kings (Charles V), popes, dukes and doges. When he died, Venice paid him the honor of a state funeral. He is buried in the church Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Friari.

Raphael (actually Raffaello Santi; 1483-1520)

He was born in Urbino but traveled from Perugia and Florence to Rome where he was commissioned by Pope Julius II to paint the room in which the Holy Father signs the papal pardons (Stanza della Signatura). The motifs of this monumental work almost seem to jump right out of the art program of the Renaissance: it shows the harmonization of religion and philosophy, of Christianity and antiquity and of church and state. The church is represented by the trinity, the apostles and the church fathers, philosophy is represented by the group of three of philosophers and listeners: Plato, the idealist, points toward Heaven, Aristotle, the realist, points down to the ground, Socrates ticks off his arguments on his fingers and Alcibades listens enraptured. The group also includes other philosophers as well as the half-naked Diogenes, Archimedes with his circles, Pythagoras with a harmony table, Heraclit creating puzzles and among the listening students is a man who looks like Raphael. Raphael's work shows this reconciliation most prominently in his numerous paintings of the Virgin Mary where he unifies the grace of antiquity with Christian religiousness. The sweetness of his Virgin Mary paintings is unsurpassed. In this synthesis he also incorporates other painters such as Leonardo, Giorgione or Michelangelo. His most famous Mother of God, the *Sistine Madonna*, has become the mother of all Mothers of God. In a classic pyramidal arrangement her blue cape blows in the wind of the Heavens and her red undergarments peek out. Her face is rosy and she looks upon the world in a sad and surprised kind of way holding in her arm the innocent child as the curtain opens behind her opening the view to paradise. This is the most favorite Virgin Mary in Christianity and is the model for innumerable devotional objects, reproductions and postcards. Raphael was the jolliest of all the artists. With him you do not feel the birthing pains inherent to creating art, you cannot detect puzzles as in the case of Leonardo and you are not scared by the demonic energies in Michelangelo's work (which is why an English school of art found him too superficial and consequently called themselves "pre-raphaelites"). With Raphael there is no gap between body and spirit or between feeling and intellect. His lover was probably the model for the Sistine Madonna. As Vasari reports, he dove into amorous adventures with abandon so that he one day "overstepped his borders" and died of overexertion when he was only 37.

The cities

These artists, along with countless architects, craftspeople and master builders, built the treasure chest of Italy and then filled it with so many pieces of art that the country is now the Mecca of anyone who is educated in art or thirsty for the company of beautiful objects. The cities of Italy were turned into luminous islands of lavishness. The popes converted the ruins of antiquity to a new baroque Rome of magnificence around St. Peter's Basilica, the largest church of Christendom. Florence adored the dome of their cathedral which Brunelleschi had erected and which defied the laws of gravity and the millionaires like the Medici and the Pitti filled their palaces on both sides of the Arno with the works that were leaving the ateliers and workshops of Florentine artists by the hundreds. In Pisa on any given day one could admire the victory of the marble tower against the forces of gravity right up until Galileo and his experiments unveiled the physical secrets behind it all. Palladio decorated Vicenza and surroundings with his palaces and villas built in the style of antiquity and which became the model for all English country homes, the column-decorated palaces in the US South and the White House in Washington. The coronation of this era and the ones to follow was this very Fata Morgana over the water, which took the shape of golden domes and palaces and went by the name of Venice. With its singular backdrop the city on the lagoon was the magical place that writers continued to pick to stage their work: from Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* to Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* right up to the mysteries by Donna Leon. The long blossoming of this city set the stage for a culture of celebration and which spread Venice's reputation throughout Europe: the election of a new doge, celebration of women's day--the Garanghelo--the birthday of a patron saint, St. Mark, and the largest festival of the year, the Sposalizio del Mar, Venice's ceremonial marriage with the sea: All of that offered the opportunity for regattas with thousands of boats covered with pennants and gondolas on the Grand Canal and in the sea facing Piazza San Marco and the oriental facade of St. Mark's Basilica and Doge's Palace. Venice's carnival became legendary. And as time wore on and Venice lasted, the city grew to become the city of poetry, of yearning and of honeymoons. Venice was also responsible for inventing a dubious urban construct: the Jewish ghetto, named after the Italian word for foundry which is getto--and which lent all ghettos around the world its name.

From the late 17th century onward these Italian cities were sought out by young men eager to further their education. And these types of trips can still be recommended today. If you want to educate your eye and sense of taste you should leave the beaches of Rimini and travel to Venice, Florence or Rome since Raphael's and Titian's women are still more beautiful than the bikini girls in the colony of Wanne-Eikel and Bottrop.

The end of the Renaissance

And why did the springs with all this beauty cease to flow after 130 years? Because an Italian and a German squelched them.

--In 1492, the Genoan Cristoforo Colombo discovered America and the Portuguese found the sea route to India. Henceforth, the merchants of northwest Europe chose to import and export their goods via Antwerp and Lisbon. The Dutch inherited Italy's role.

--In 1517, Augustinian monk Martin Luther nails 95 theses to the door of the Wittenberg Castle Church which lent a public voice to the widespread and latent (subliminal) dissatisfaction with the church. What begins as a trickle of dissatisfaction quickly becomes a dam-breaking torrent and split the church for good. When the waters began to recede, the floods had left three separate camps.

--The Catholics. They remained loyal to the Roman Church or were brought to their senses with interrogations of the less gentle sort. This took place mainly in Spain, Italy, France, Poland and Ireland.

--The Lutherans and the Anglicans. The Lutherans followed the teachings of Martin Luther and created churches closely tied to the governing princes. The Anglican Church was loyal to the King of England but they combined Catholic liturgy (the form of worship) with the Calvinist teachings of predetermination (God has preordained the fate of every soul).

--The Calvinists and Puritans. The name Calvinists is based on the reformer Calvin who set up a fundamentalist church state in Geneva; in England the radical Protestants were called Puritans who mainly sought to purge the liturgy of all Catholic remnants. Both of these groups did not like the idea of a central church with priests and bishops as Luther had also organized. They preferred the democratic ideals of a free commune without priests or prelates: everyone was to be their own pastor. Thus they split up into a myriad of sects, which compensated their colorful diversity with fundamentalist determination. They were active mainly in Switzerland, Holland, Scotland, and England and then were pretty much undisturbed in America. These are also the countries that invented democracy. The Lutherans were the most loyal to the state, a characteristic that was to have quite negative consequences as history unfolded.

But for Italy the break from the church mainly meant that the flow of money from countless taxes and fees and which had fertilized Italy in so many ways, dried up.

Because of the discovery of America and the Reformation Italy lost two of its most important sources of revenue. The country never did recuperate from that. Instead the central focal point of Europe followed the sun and traveled west.

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