**The Italian Renaissance**

The Renaissance is generally considered to have started in Florence, Italy around the years 1350 to 1400. The start of the Renaissance also was the end of the [Middle Ages](http://www.ducksters.com/history/middle_ages_timeline.php).   
  
**Humanism**   
  
One of the big changes in the Renaissance was in the basic way people thought about things. In the Middle Ages people thought that life was supposed to be hard. They grew up thinking that life was nothing but hard work and war.   
  
However, around the 1300s, the people in Florence, Italy began to think differently about life. They studied the writings and works of the Greeks and the Romans and realized that earlier civilizations had lived differently.   
  
This new way of thinking was called Humanism. Now people thought that life could be enjoyable and they could have comforts. They started to think that people should be educated and that things like art, music, and science could make life better for everyone. This was a real change in the way people thought.   
  
**Florence, Italy**   
  
At the start of the Renaissance, [Italy](http://www.ducksters.com/geography/country/italy.php) was divided up into a number of powerful city-states. These were areas of land that were ruled by a large city. Each city-state had its own government. One of the major city-states was Florence. The government that ran Florence was a republic, like [ancient Rome](http://www.ducksters.com/history/ancient_rome.php). This meant that the citizens elected their own leaders.   
  
In the late 1300s, Florence had become a rich city. Wealthy merchants and businessmen had the money to hire artisans and craftspeople. This inspired competitions among artists and thinkers. Art began to flourish and new thoughts began to emerge.

In the 1400's the Medici family came into power in Florence. They were wealthy bankers and helped the arts along by sponsoring many artists and using their personal funds to further the humanist movement.   
  
**Petrarch and Humanism**   
  
Francesco Petrarch is often called the "Father of Humanism". He was a scholar and a poet who lived in Florence in the 1300s. He studied poets and philosophers from Ancient Rome such as Cicero and Virgil. His ideas and poetry became an inspiration to many writers and poets throughout all of Europe as the Renaissance spread.   
  
**New Ideas Spread**   
  
This new way of thinking and style of art quickly spread to other wealthy Italian city-states such as Rome, Venice, and Milan. This early part of the Renaissance is often called the Italian Renaissance. Italy would become wealthy through trade and their new ideas soon spread throughout all of Europe.

**The Northern Renaissance**  
  
The center of the European Renaissance movement was in [Italy](http://www.ducksters.com/geography/country/italy_history_timeline.php). Over time, however, the ideas and influence of the Italian Renaissance spread to other areas of Europe. The "Northern" Renaissance refers to Renaissance art, architecture, and philosophy that took place outside of Italy.

**French Renaissance**   
  
One of the first places that the Renaissance spread to was France. This was because France invaded Italy in the late 1400s and came into contact with Italian paintings and artistic philosophies. The King of France, Francis I, invited many Italian artists to move to France including Leonardo da Vinci.   
  
French architecture changed during this time as well. Kings and nobles began to build bright pleasure palaces called chateaus instead of the dark fortress castles of the Middle Ages. Many chateaus had large landscaped gardens filled with statues and fountains.   
  
**Dutch Renaissance**   
  
During the [Dutch](http://www.ducksters.com/geography/country/netherlands_history_timeline.php) Renaissance, Dutch painters developed their own style. Dutch painters brought a new approach to detail, realism, and naturalism. They also came up with innovations on how to handle oil paint, allowing them to make very detailed and accurate paintings. Some of the early important Dutch painters included Jan van Eyck, Robert Campin, and Gerard David.   
  
The Dutch also had an impact on the philosophy of humanism. Catholic priest Erasmus was called the "Prince of Humanists". He wrote many important works including *Praise of Folly* and *Copia: Foundations of the Abundant Style*.   
  
**German Renaissance**   
  
Germany had a significant influence on the European Renaissance starting with the invention of the printing press by Johannes Gutenberg. The printing press allowed for the new ideas of the Renaissance to spread throughout Europe.   
  
Another German that played a major role in the Renaissance was a priest named Martin Luther. He started the [Protestant Reformation](http://www.ducksters.com/history/renaissance_reformation.php) when he published his *Ninety-Five Theses* in 1517. His ideas attacked the Catholic Church and caused many people to rethink Christianity.   
  
Finally, many German artists traveled to Italy and learned from the artists of the Italian Renaissance. The most famous German painter of the time was Albrecht Durer. His talented work was much admired throughout Europe.   
  
**English Renaissance**   
  
One of the last areas of Europe to experience the Renaissance was England. The peak of the English Renaissance occurred during the [Elizabethan Era](http://www.ducksters.com/history/renaissance/elizabethan_era.php). During this time England experience peace and prosperity. Many foreign artists were imported to the Tudor court and their ideas began take root in England.   
  
The most important aspect of the English Renaissance was the theatre. Popular playwrights such as [William Shakespeare](http://www.ducksters.com/biography/authors/william_shakespeare.php) and Christopher Marlowe wrote some of the most memorable plays in world history. Permanent theatres were established throughout London where a variety of plays were staged including tragedies, comedies, and history plays.   
  
**Age of Exploration**   
  
At the same time as the Northern Renaissance, many of these same countries were also entering the [Age of Exploration](http://www.ducksters.com/history/renaissance/age_of_exploration_and_discovery.php). Spain and Portugal were funding expeditions that discovered trade routes to the Far East, the Americas, and circumnavigated the globe.   
  
**Interesting Facts about the Northern Renaissance**

* Nuremberg in southern Germany was the central city of the German Renaissance.
* Dutch artists were some of the first western artists to specialize in landscapes.
* The Portuguese invented the caravel during the Renaissance. This maneuverable sailing ship helped improve trade, exploration, and travel.
* French-Dutch composer Josquin des Prez is often considered the world's first musical genius.
* The word "renaissance" is a French word that means "rebirth".