Did the Renaissance Change Man's View of the World?

The Renaissance was a period of big change in European history. It was a time of intellectual excitement, when art and literature blossomed and groundbreaking scientific advances were made. Over the course of about 300 years, the Renaissance spread from its home base in Italy to western and northern Europe. The effect was like a sunrise making its way across the land.

To understand the changes the Renaissance produced, it helps to review what European society was like before it arrived. The time period before the Renaissance is usually called the Middle Ages, which stretched from the fall of the Roman Empire around 500 CE to about 1350. During the Middle Ages, the Roman Catholic Church and the Pope were the primary players in Europe. The custodians of culture — that is, the people who owned most of the books and made handwritten copies of the Bible — were priests who often lived a closed existence inside the walls of monasteries. Schools were few. Illiteracy was widespread. Most of the population, more than 85 percent, was peasant farmers called serfs who worked for a lord and his estate. Serfs were little more than slaves. Both serfs and their masters looked to the Catholic Church and the Bible to explain the world. The art and literature that existed focused on Jesus Christ and the sins of mankind.

In the 1300s, important changes began to happen. Improved farming methods helped peasants become more self-sufficient. More and more serfs gained their freedom and no longer depended on lords. Some freed serfs migrated to towns, where they took up trades. The number of merchants and bankers increased. Since these people needed to have an education to effectively carry on their work, literacy spread. Eventually, educated people began to question the teachings of the Church. A movement called humanism developed, which praised the beauty and intelligence of the individual.

As more people became educated, humanism worked its way into the arts, literature, the sciences, and medicine. This early Renaissance movement was especially vigorous in the city-states of Italy — places like Rome, Venice, Florence, and Milan. The invention of the printing press in the mid-1400s gave the Renaissance and humanism even more momentum. Primarily, the Renaissance was an upper-middle class movement, but thanks to the mechanization of printing, shopkeepers and street sweepers were able to afford books and articles that discussed the new ideas spreading across Europe. As a result, people started to look at themselves and their world in a new way.

But what, exactly, was this new way? Examine the documents that follow and answer the question: How did the Renaissance change man's view of the world?
Background Essay Questions

1. What is the meaning of the word “renaissance”? Describe the time period known as the Renaissance.

2. In general terms, how would you describe the Middle Ages?

3. Why did education start to increase during the 1300s?

4. Why was the printing press so important to the spread of the Renaissance and humanist thinking?

5. Define these terms:
   - Middle Ages
   - monasteries
   - illiteracy
   - serfs
   - humanism

Timeline

1324 CE – Mansa Musa begins Hajj to Mecca.
1433 – Zheng He makes a final voyage to Africa.
1453 – Byzantine Empire falls.
1455 – Gutenberg prints 180 Bibles.
1521 – Magellan dies in the Philippines.
1601 – Shakespeare writes Hamlet.
Document A

Sources: Images: Madonna Enthroned Between Two Angels by Duccio di Buoninsegna, late 13th century; Mona Lisa by Leonardo da Vinci, early 16th century.

Note: Duccio Di Boulninsegna's painting shows The Mother Mary on a throne with the baby Jesus on her lap. Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa is believed to be a portrait of Lisa Gherardini, the wife of a wealthy Florentine merchant.

The [clearest] evidence of the break with medieval culture comes from the visual arts. [It] was the essence of the Renaissance.... One begins to know the names of the artists ... feel stronger emotions in the subjects ... see well-defined landscapes, natural folds in drapery, and three-dimensional figures; and one begins to notice the emphasis on symbolic representation giving way to depictions of recognizable scenes ... the new artistic styles would echo the broader movements and interests of the new age.... Neither the techniques nor the forms of artistic expression were to be the same again.

Document Analysis

1. What two artists created these paintings and which would be considered a Renaissance painter?

2. How do the paintings compare in terms of their subject matter?

3. In comparing the women in the two paintings, which image seems more generalized and which seems to reveal the special characteristics of the individual?

4. Using hints from the text excerpt, describe at least three ways in which the paintings are different.

5. How do changes in this art show that during the Renaissance, man's view of himself and his world was changing?
Document B

Source: Excerpt from an English play called Everyman, written by an unknown author in 1485.

Note: Though written in 1485, which was during the Renaissance period, these lines carry a message right out of the Middle Ages.

“Ye [man] think sin in the beginning full sweet,
Which in the end causeth thy soul to weep,
When the body lieth in clay.
Here shall you see how fellowship and jollity,
Both strength, pleasure, and beauty,
Will fade from thee as flower in May.
For ye shall hear, how our Heaven-King
Calleth Everyman to a general reckoning:*
Give audience, and hear what he doth say.”

*Judgement Day

Source: Excerpt from Act II, Scene II of Hamlet by William Shakespeare, 1601.

“What a piece of work is a man! how noble in reason!
How infinite in faculty! in form and moving how express and admirable! in action how like an angel!
in apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the world! the paragon* of animals!”

*perfect model

Document Analysis

1. Who is Everyman?

2. How do Everyman’s ideas about good times change as he gets older?

3. Who is the Heaven-King and what is the “general reckoning”?

4. What does Shakespeare mean when he says, “What a piece of work is a man!”?

5. What are some of man’s special qualities, according to Shakespeare?

6. How do these two passages show how the Renaissance changed man’s view of how he should live life?
**Document C**

**Source:** Drawings of the universe by Claudius Ptolemy (circa 100 CE) and Nicolaus Copernicus (circa 1500).

**Note:** Ptolemy (poh-tuh-lee) was a Roman astronomer who lived in Alexandria, Egypt, shortly after the time of Jesus. He developed a theory of the universe that was adopted by most scholars during the Middle Ages. The Polish astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus lived from 1473 to 1543. Relying mostly on mathematics and observation, he developed a different understanding of the universe. Geocentric means "earth-centered" and heliocentric means "sun-centered."

---

**The Geocentric Universe of Ptolemy**

[Diagram of the geocentric universe by Ptolemy]

**Note:** The Latin in the outer sphere can be translated "The Empire of Heaven and the Home of God and the Elect."

---

**The Heliocentric Universe of Copernicus**

[Diagram of the heliocentric universe by Copernicus]

---

**Document Analysis**

1. According to Ptolemy’s diagram, how does the universe work? Where is the sun (solis) in his diagram?

2. According to Copernicus’s diagram, how does the universe work?

3. The ideas of Copernicus were upsetting to the Catholic Church. What might explain this?

4. Which drawing of the universe has a habitation or home for God, the deity?

5. How might the ideas of Copernicus have changed the way people thought about the nature of man and man’s place in the universe?
**Document D**


*Note:* The image on the left reflects the Middle Ages belief that each sign of the zodiac* governed a certain part of the body. For example, the constellation of stars called Aries the Ram controlled the head. The illustration on the right was based on the research done by Andreas Vesalius, who dissected human corpses to better explain the human body.

*The zodiac is a band of 12 constellations (stars) that stretch across the sky.*

**Document Analysis**

1. Which of the drawings is more realistic? Explain.

2. During medieval times, what was widely believed to control the health and well being of different parts of the body? Give an example.

3. What do you suppose Vesalius thought of the zodiac theory of anatomy?

4. How did Vesalius get his information about the makeup of the human body?

5. In summary, how does this document reveal how the Renaissance changed man’s view of the world?