

L E S S O N 4

Renaissance in Northern Europe

Pieter Brueghel the Elder (*BROO guhl*) was a successful artist born in Flanders about 1530. Flanders is now part of the countries of France and Belgium.

Brueghel is best known for his paintings of peasants. His painting *The Peasant Dance*, shown below, is a fine example of the Renaissance art of northern Europe.

The subject of the painting is a village celebration. Brueghel portrays peasants as real people. Some are fat, some have missing teeth, and some have big noses. Like

many painters of the Renaissance, Brueghel relied on colorful, vivid detail and realism.

Brueghel's peasants are dancing, drinking, kissing, and talking. Look at the strain on the face of the bagpipe player and the expression in the eyes of his friend, who is trying so hard to get his attention.

Like Italian Renaissance artists, Brueghel painted people as they really were. He showed their flaws as well as their strengths. Such honesty makes his paintings sparkle with life and emotion.



THINKING FOCUS

How was the northern European Renaissance different from the Italian Renaissance?

Key Term

- secular

◀ *The Peasant Dance by Pieter Brueghel illustrates the style of northern European painting.*

The Spread of Ideas

The Renaissance ideas that inspired Brueghel began to spread to northern Europe in the late 1400s. How did these ideas move from Italy to countries such as France, Germany, England, and Spain?

Trade and Travelers

One way was through travel. Italian businessmen had offices in cities throughout Europe. Whether in Geneva or London, they lived in Italian Renaissance style. They carried this style as they moved through Europe while trading. Other Europeans began to appreciate the Italians' emphasis on wealth, beauty, and personal achievement. The map below shows the major trade routes of Europe. Which of the cities do you

think felt the greatest impact of the Italian Renaissance?

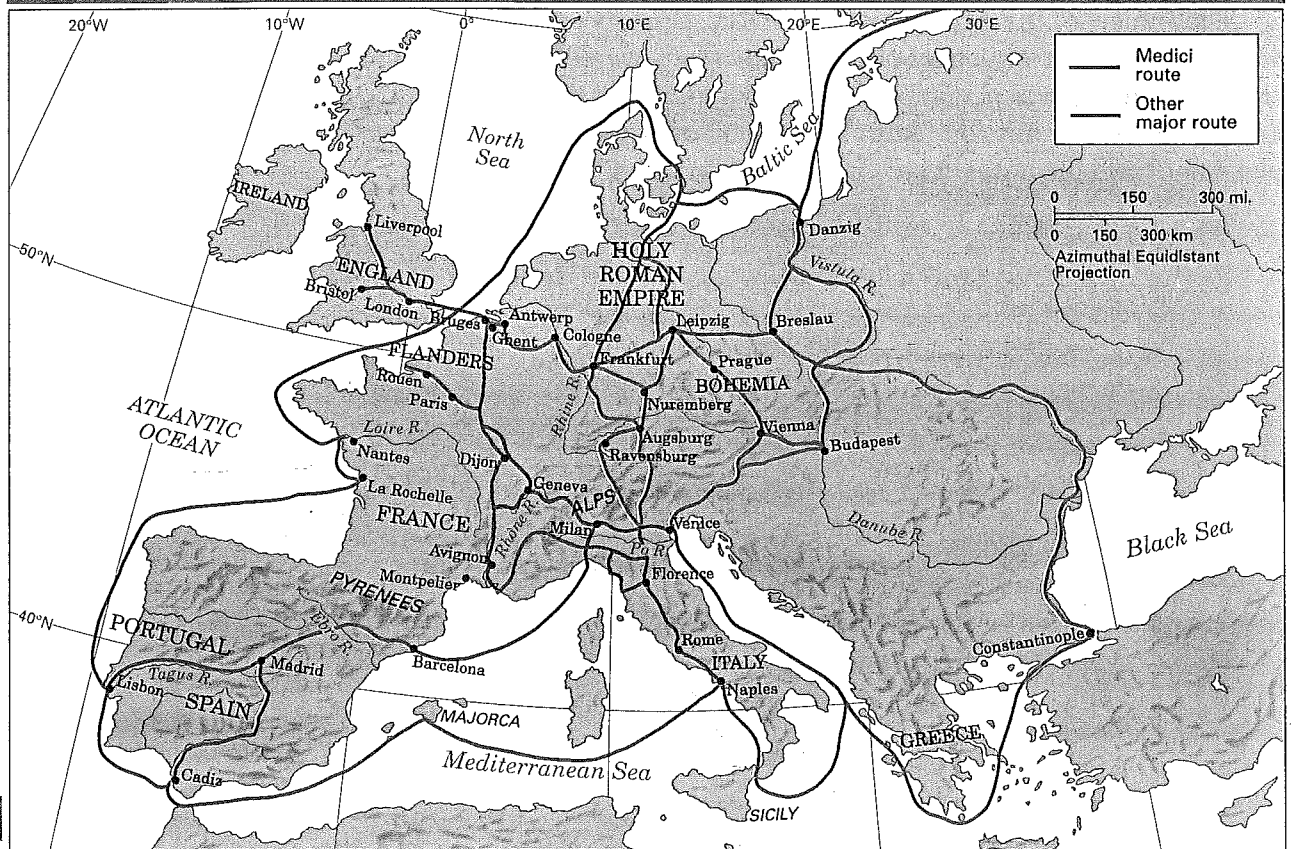
While Italians were traveling through Europe, other Europeans made journeys to Italy. Artists such as Brueghel came to Italy to study art. Scholars came to the great library at the Vatican in Rome. And many foreign visitors came to see Rome's ancient ruins.

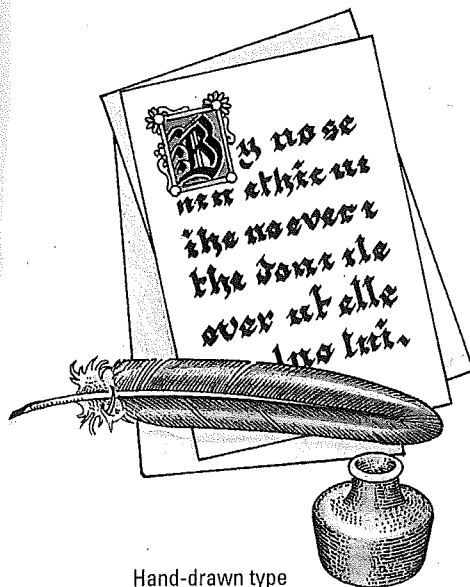
Words and Books

Renaissance ideas also spread by way of the printed word. Many people had experimented with ways to print type. Then, between 1438 and 1454, Johannes Gutenberg (*GOOT en burg*), a German, invented and perfected a movable type printing press. Because books could now be printed quickly with

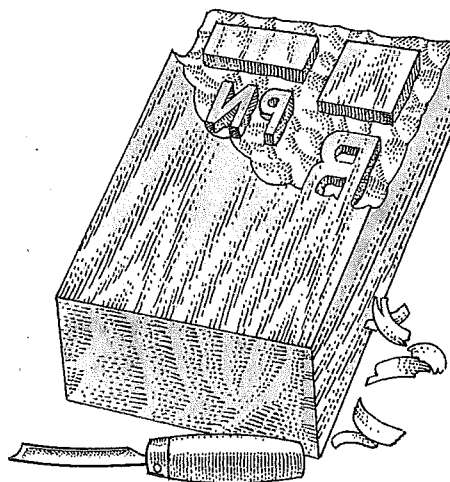
▼ How did the European trade routes affect the spread of Renaissance ideas?

Overland Trade Routes

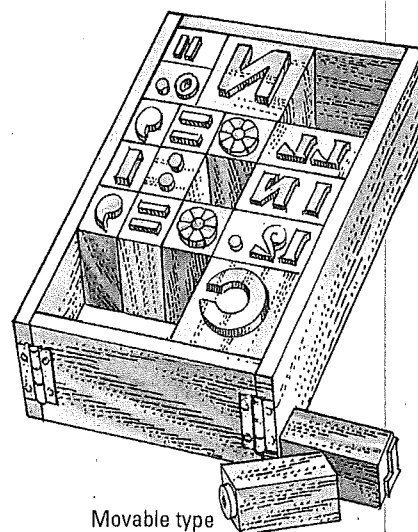




Hand-drawn type



Block type



Movable type

machines, they were cheaper to buy. Books became available to thousands of people. The presses printed everything from the Bible to Greek and Roman classics. By 1500, between 9 and 12 million books had been produced by about 1,000 printers in Europe. The literacy rate began to rise steadily as interest in learning grew.

The book trade then became a major part of trade fairs. Churches, universities, and also individuals bought books printed in many languages. Works by classical and humanist writers were translated and circulated all over the European continent.

Monarchs, Scholars, and Artists

As humanism spread, royal courts of the north, such as those of France and England, began to develop an interest in learning

and the arts. Kings and queens eagerly supported the humanist scholars and artists. For example, King Francis I of France brought Leonardo da Vinci and many other Italian artists and scholars to his court. French writer and physician François Rabelais (*rah BLEH*) summarized the outlook of the new age:

Light and dignity have been restored to the art of letters. Now all branches of science, so long extinct, have been reestablished. . . . The world now is full of scholarly men, learned teachers and ample libraries.

Francois Rabelais,
Gargantua, 1535

Renaissance values and ideas had become firmly rooted in northern Europe by the mid-1500s. ■

▲ During the Middle Ages, books were hand printed. At first, Europeans printed books by using block printing. In this technique, letters are carved on a block of wood, the block is inked, and the ink is transferred onto paper. For the later movable-type press, a printer joins individual letters together in a case and then inks them. Cases of movable type were easy to put together. Letters could also be reused.

■ How did the ideas of the Italian Renaissance spread to northern Europe?

Ideas and Ideals

The Renaissance humanism of northern Europe was not simply Italian humanism transplanted. Northern humanism had a character of its own. During the Middle

Ages, feudalism had been stronger in northern Europe than it had been in Italy. As a result, the northern Europeans with the most money and power were nobles and

➤ *Royal courts, rather than the homes of the wealthy, were the center of Renaissance learning in northern Europe. Here, Francis I of France listens to a lecture in his court.*

■ *Did northern humanism stress the spiritual or the secular? Explain.*

▽ *In this detail from the Ghent altarpiece, Jan van Eyck painted Jesus in a realistic, lifelike way.*



royalty, not members of the patrician families. Thus, nobles and royalty became patrons of the arts as were the patrician families in Italy. Renaissance learning in northern Europe centered on the royal courts rather than in the homes of great families.

Northern humanism also differed from Italian humanism in the role of the church. Because northern Europe had fewer large towns to act as cultural centers, the church played a larger, more active role in northern culture. Northern Europeans, like the Italians, valued **secular**, or nonreligious ideas, such as individual achievement and progress. But northern Europeans also emphasized the importance of spiritual life.

Thus, northern humanists studied more than the philosophy and literature of ancient Greece and Rome. Students also learned Greek and Hebrew so they could read ancient Bibles and understand how early Christians practiced their religion.

As northern Europeans began to absorb the ideas of humanism, some began to question the way that church leaders interpreted the Bible. Specifically, humanists

Achievements

More than just the quest for knowledge and learning spread from Italy. The changing style of the arts and sciences also found its way to northern Europe.

Arts and Literature

Many northern artists expressed religious themes in their work, but they began to represent both people and nature more



thought church leaders put too much emphasis on ceremony and ritual.

One of these scholars, Desiderius Erasmus (*ih RAZ muhs*), a Dutch priest and 16th century humanist, wanted to reform the church. He believed that church teachings should be easy for everyone to understand, and that everyone should be able to read the Bible, not just the clergy. Erasmus traveled across Europe and wrote dozens of books, mostly on religion. His works were widely published and read, thanks to the new technology of printing. ■

realistically. Look at the painting at left by the Dutch artist Jan van Eyck. Note how realistic the figure in the painting looks.

Realism was also important to the humanist writers of northern Europe. They wrote about religion, politics, and the behavior of their fellow human beings.

Sir Thomas More was an English statesman, scholar, author,

and a friend of Erasmus who lived from 1478 to 1535. Based on the Renaissance concept of the individual worth, More proposed that all men should be treated equally.

In his most famous book, *Utopia*, More described the rules of a society in which all men are equal and everyone works together to achieve happiness:

The second rule of nature is to lead a life as free of anxiety and as full of joy as possible, and to help all one's fellow men toward that end.

Sir Thomas More, *Utopia*, 1516

Some Renaissance writers tried to entertain as well as educate their audiences. William Shakespeare, born in England in 1564, was a poet, an actor, and a master playwright. Shakespeare's characters are full of life, wit, and passion. They reveal the strengths and weaknesses of people from all walks of life. Many plays are built around historic figures, such as Julius Caesar and the kings of England.

The following passage reflects Shakespeare's attitude toward life and art:

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and
women merely players.
They have their exits and their
entrances,
And one man in his time
plays many parts . . .

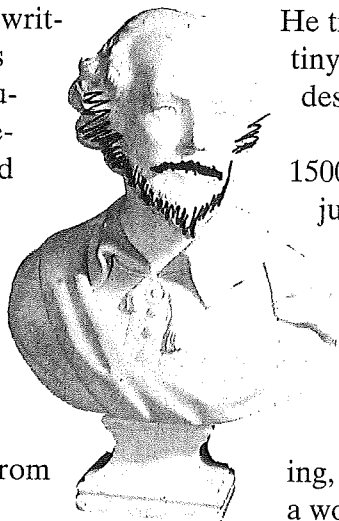
William Shakespeare,
As You Like It, 1599

Medicine

The achievements of the northern Renaissance were not limited to the arts. Medicine also made advances. In Switzerland, Paracelsus, a physician and chemist, discovered a new way to treat illness.

He treated his patients with tiny doses of poisons to destroy diseased tissue.

The surgeons of the 1500s often had to treat injuries caused by firearms and cannons. Ambroise Paré, a French surgeon, developed bandages to replace the common practice of the time of cauterizing, or burning, the edges of a wound. He also was the first to use thread to close a wound. Paré's attitude toward his medical skills might be described as evidence that he was a humanist in the northern tradition: "I treated him, God cured him." ■



◀ William Shakespeare, shown at left, wrote many of the most famous works of the Renaissance.

■ Describe some of the achievements of the northern Renaissance.

R E V I E W

- 1. FOCUS** How was the northern European Renaissance different from the Italian Renaissance?
- 2. CONNECT** How did feudalism in northern Europe make the character of the Renaissance different in the north than in Italy?
- 3. CULTURE** How did the scholar Erasmus represent northern humanism?
- 4. CRITICAL THINKING** Why was the printing press an important part of the Renaissance?
- 5. WRITING ACTIVITY** Imagine that you live in Paris in the early 1500s. You have a sister or brother who lives in Florence whom you write to regularly. Write a letter to her or him discussing the changes that the Renaissance has brought to life in your city.