


THE RENAISSANCE

IN A NUTSHELL

Written and read by

Peter Whitfield



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1	The Renaissance is one of the most powerful...	5:07
2	In the 14th and 15th centuries...	4:53
3	Virtue was 'armed wisdom', it led to...	5:27
4	Bruni had boasted that 'Florence harbours the greatest minds...'	7:04
5	The influence of Vitruvius and the new approach...	5:22
6	Throughout the 16th century churches and palaces...	1:54
7	The development of painting in these years...	6:48
8	With these three painters – Botticelli, Mantegna and Bellini...	3:14
9	Leonardo was slighting when he spoke of sculpture...	2:47
10	In Venice, the years of Michelangelo and Raphael...	3:09
11	The 'Madonna of Chancellor Rolin' is a fascinating essay...	4:20
12	Music is more difficult to dovetail neatly...	4:40
13	As polyphony became more sophisticated...	3:05
14	Renaissance art represented a rediscovery of the world.	5:24
15	It is often said that the true potential of the printing press...	5:27
16	The revelations of Thoth-Hermes were believed...	2:56
17	Unfortunately for its devotees, the whole Hermetic edifice...	6:13

Total time: 78:05

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Botticelli's delicate angels; Michelangelo's towering figures; Leonardo's scientific notebooks; the city of Florence brilliant with artists and scholars; princes and merchants competing with each other in the refinement of their palaces – these are some of the images conjured up by the word Renaissance. This was a period when the artists of northern Italy created nothing less than a new vision of humanity, full of grace, colour, movement and power, with which they sought to express the contemporary sense of a world made new.

Where did that sense come from? Generations of historians have striven to analyse and explain exactly what happened in Italy in the 15th century. Was it truly a period of rebirth, when intellectual freedom was re-awakened after long centuries of medieval darkness? Was it a turning-point

in mankind's understanding of himself and his world? Or is the Renaissance largely a myth – a few painters and writers experimenting with new ideas which had little or no impact on real life? These are the questions that this brief history sets out to explore.

We tend to forget that the Renaissance was not just an era of art. It began with the literary movement known as Humanism in which writers and scholars, beginning with Petrarch, took human experience and human values as their subject and their ideal. Intellect, nobility, magnanimity, refinement – these were the qualities which, they believed, should enrich human life – individually and socially. They could be exercised creatively by the artist, the ruler, the philosopher and the scholar. This view of mankind is very different from the traditional religious perception of

humanity as sinful, helpless and wretched. 'Renaissance Man' was conscious of his potential power and believed himself to be in control of his own destiny. This explains why historians have spoken repeatedly of the Renaissance as the moment of 'the rediscovery of the individual'.

As an intellectual movement, Humanism was secular in its inspiration and intention, where formerly all intellectual life in Europe had been dominated by the Church and by religious thinkers. Humanism was man-centred rather than God-centred. Contemporaries were well aware of this, and spoke of themselves as living in an age of rebirth, by which they meant the rebirth of classical ideals, to be found in the literature of Greece and Rome. The term 'Middle Ages' was coined to describe the long period during which classical thought had been eclipsed, and human life overshadowed by religious, other-worldly concerns. Petrarch and Boccaccio were the founders of Renaissance literature because they took real human life, both emotional and social, as their subject. This secularity appealed to the social elite, the rulers and princes, who saw themselves

as exemplifying the Renaissance ideals of magnificence, creativity and power.

One of the principal ways in which they expressed that power was by commissioning artists and architects to fashion a new environment in which to live, and it was in art that the spirit of the Renaissance was most clearly seen. Artists were inspired to develop a new image of man, one that reflected the humanist ideals of nobility, grace, dignity and power. They took their models from classical art, whose remains were to be found throughout Italy. The flat, linear, devotional art of the Middle Ages was rejected, replaced by the concept of art as a mirror of the real world. Space was ordered according to rules of perspective and proportion, while the world of nature was presented with freshness, accurate observation, and a new sense of the beauty of the physical world. Music too became emotionally richer through the development of complex polyphony, although Palestrina, Victoria and Tallis sustained music's links with Catholic ritual longer than the link between the Church and the visual arts.

Outside the artistic world, momentous

events were taking place which were re-shaping man's understanding of himself and his world. The Age of Discovery revealed literally a New World, undreamed of by ancient and medieval civilisations, while the great voyages of discovery seemed to exemplify all the boldness and creativity idealised by the humanist philosophy. On the technical front, the invention of printing clearly opened a new era in the dissemination of literature and ideas, making new currents of thought accessible as never before. Even the Reformation, which might appear to signal a return to the medieval domination of religious concerns, can also be seen as marking the new freedom of the individual, for the whole thrust of the reformers' claims was that the individual has access to God through his own conscience and spirituality, outside the sacramental barriers erected by the Church. Even though the Reformation plunged Europe into decades of savage religious warfare, it too must be seen as breaking apart the rigid orthodoxy of medieval Christendom. The rise of secular science was another act in this revolutionary drama, for the Copernican

theory displaced man and his world from the centre of the universe, overturning the world-picture that had prevailed for centuries.

It is for these reasons that the Renaissance is more than simply a movement in the history of art. We are justified in seeing it as a turning point in man's self-understanding, a critical age in which the European mind moved into new territory with a vision which, arguably, found its true fulfilment in the later Age of Enlightenment.

This disc discusses the intellectual origins of the age of the Renaissance, its social and political dimension, the works of its great artists, and the complex problem of the relationship between art and the wider history of civilisation. It explains briefly and forcefully what we mean by 'Renaissance Man', and why that term stands in many ways at the threshold of the modern world.

Notes by Peter Whitfield



Peter Whitfield is an historian and a poet. His books include *A Universe of Books: Readings in World Literature*, *Landmarks in Western Science* and *New Found Lands – Maps in the History of Exploration*. He is a keen cyclist and has written books on his sport. He has also written and read *Darwin – In a Nutshell* for Naxos AudioBooks.

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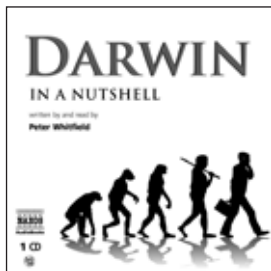
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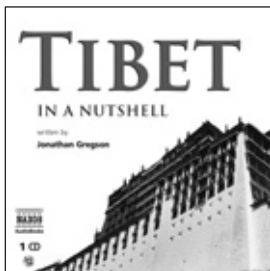
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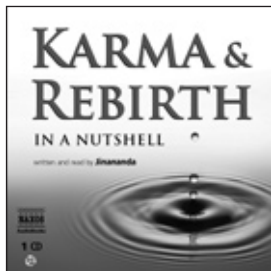
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The Renaissance was one of the greatest moments in Western cultural history.

It was the time of Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo; architects such as Brunelleschi and Palladio; composers such as Palestrina and Tallis; as well as innovative writers and philosophers. It was a time of great social change and remarkable flowering in science, exploration and politics; the age when medieval Christendom was split apart by the Reformation. The printing press played a key role, as did the development of the New World and the mapping of newly discovered lands. The Copernican view began to take hold, suggesting a new place in the universe for Earth itself. In this fascinating introduction, Peter Whitfield looks at this time of change as, from its epicentre in Italy, it spread to all parts of Europe.



Peter Whitfield is an historian and a poet. His books include *A Universe of Books: Readings in World Literature*. He has also written and read *Darwin – In a Nutshell* for Naxos AudioBooks.

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