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

Overview: The word “renaissance” means "rebirth” or “revival.” In world history, the Renaissance is used to describe a period in Europe that began around the year 1350 and lasted until about 1700. Thanks in large part to the scientific and cultural advances made during this time, people saw themselves in a new way. The impact of the Renaissance was powerful and has endured for centuries. This Mini-Q asks you to explore how this exciting and important era changed how man understood his world.

The Documents:

Document A: The Madonna and the Mona Lisa

Document B: Everyman and Shakespeare

Document C: Ptolemy and Copernicus

Document D: Zodiac Man and Vesalius

Background Essay

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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?