

Compare and Contrast the Northern with the Italian Renaissance.

A sharp break with medieval values and institutions, a new awareness of the individual, an awakened interest in the material world and nature, and a recovery of the cultural heritage of ancient Greece and Rome are the major achievements of the Renaissance. The term Renaissance refers to the period between the heyday of medieval universalism, as embodied in the Papacy and Holy Roman Empire, and the convulsions and transformations of the 17th century. Although the Renaissance was born in Italy, it came to have a northern counterpart in the mid-fifteenth century, thanks to the invention of the printing press. Although the Northern and the Italian Renaissance are similar under general aspects, they do differ in their timing, Humanism and the themes for their Art.

The Italian Renaissance, (literally “rebirth”, from the Italian word “rinascita”), was born in the city state of Florence, famous for its commerce and its banks. The flourishing economy of the Medici’s city state favored the advances in literature, and the arts which took place here during the Early Renaissance. Later, when the money shifted to Rome, and the Papacy, the High Renaissance started. One of the important elements of the Italian Renaissance was Humanism. Humanism is basically the study of classical texts and ideas. Two of the most important Humanists were Petrarch, whom recuperated texts of great authors such as Cicero, in Latin, or Pico della Mirandola, whom inspired by Greek philosopher Plato’s positive view of human potential, wrote his Oration on the Dignity of Man. Another important aspect of the Renaissance was the great progress in art. Renaissance artists were considered important individuals in their own right, and it is at this point that names like those of Raphael, Leonardo, and Michelangelo appear. Their painting styles were much more naturalistic than those of the Middle Ages. Perhaps the most important discovery in art was that of single point perspective, permitting a realistic setting in the works of art. In Italy, artistic themes mixed Christian legend with pagan beliefs in order to result in a new mix, unfamiliar to the orthodox Christian world of the Middle Ages. Overall, the Italian Renaissance established the foundations for our contemporaneous Western Culture. It blended the Christian religion of the declining Papacy, with Roman law and Greek philosophy recuperated from the ancient classical writings thanks to the Italian Humanism.

These intellectual and artistic developments first took place in the world of the Italian city states, but eventually, the invention of the printing press in the mid-fifteenth century allowed these cultural trends to spread to other parts of Europe which resulted in the creation of the Northern

Renaissance movement. Although the question as to who was the first to print using movable types is much debated, Gutenberg is often accredited with the invention, in his German city of Mainz. The significant increase in literacy in the sixteenth century was due to this invention and helped spread the ideas of the northern Humanists. The northerners, at this time, were still seeking ways to deepen their Christian beliefs and understanding. They believed they could achieve this higher level by studying early Christian authors. Eventually, northern writers such as Erasmus of Rotterdam and the English Sir Thomas More, criticized their mother Church, to find ways to better it. Erasmus' Latin translation of the New Testament played a major role in the 16th century northern movement to understand the life of the early Christians. More, on the other hand, coined the phrase "utopia" in his homonymous book, which dealt with a perfect society, free of social, political and economical injustice. Yet, although critics of the Church, both thinkers remained faithful to it, till the end. In the North, new painting techniques were experimented. Famous Flemish painters such as Hans Holbein introduced the use of oil paintings which became predominant also in the Italian Renaissance. The themes of the painting in the North though, concentrated on the life of everyday, and the objects in use at the time.

In Conclusion, the two Renaissances of Italy and of Northern Europe both sprung out from the ruins of the period of transition known as the Middle Ages, but differed in timing, literature and art because of the different mentalities and heritages of the two areas. Although Italian Humanist authors were Christians, they didn't feel they needed to prove their religious beliefs in their writings but instead set out to rediscover the classical authors to learn their philosophies and better the knowledge of their world. In the north instead, where the Christian religion had arrived later than in Italy, Northern Humanists such as More and Erasmus wished to deepen their knowledge and understanding of their faith by reading old Christian scripts. Thus, the focus shifted to Christianity rather than Classicism. In painting, although the themes differed greatly, both emphasized man, and his individualism. While in Italy, religious themes, and ancient myths blended, to be represented by human, natural and frequently naked figures, in the north, man, was shown in his everyday settings. Yet, although differences do exist between the two movements, both gave a new cultural birth to Europe after the Middle Ages, shifted the focus from God to man, and paved the way for the great changes of the following centuries.