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AP European History

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Divine Intervention of Renaissance Art

*It is sometimes argued that the Renaissance was a period best characterized as secular, humanistic, and individualistic. Using specific works of art and literature as examples, discuss the degree to which you think this is true.*

Although the Renaissance was indeed driven by a humanistic ideology wherein the people were highly individualized, the Renaissance was hardly a secular time. Much of the art from the epoch delivers a reflection of the influential consciousness of the time. Artists of the Renaissance were largely proponents of the idea of human greatness, the idea of fame, and the idea of disjunct individuality. However, despite these principally secular paradigms, religion continued to be a large influence of art and culture, but religion was not the focus by any means.

In the Renaissance era, individualism thrived because of an ideological change in the population; people had begun to realize the power they wielded as individual human beings. Another contributing factor to the spreading of the doctrine was the concept of popularity. Mortals were awarded for their individualistic inward development, and this work would correspond to “a new sort of outward distinction---the modern form of glory” (Burckhardt 22). Unlike before, artists had begun to sign their work, and it was widely known who completed various pieces of art. Many sprawling pieces of architecture, such as *Cathédrale Notre-Dame de Paris* and the *Chartes Cathedral* of France, have unknown architects because they were built before the popularization of this individualistic ideology. Hundreds of years of work on these chef-d’oeuvres, and the world at large had and has no one in particular to ascribe them to. In 1436, when the *Basilica di Santa Maria del Fiore* was finally complete, it is integral to note that Filippo Brunelleschi and Arnolfo di Cambio are both known to be the architects in charge of the cathedral’s construction. Moreover, Brunelleschi was ultimately buried in an addition to the church, which is a slight escalation of importance for the human architect than that which was exhibited for the architects of *Notre Dame*. Disregarding the emphasis on individual artists, the art of the Renaissance in and of itself evince an emphasis on the individual. In much of Leonardo DaVinci’s work, such as his painting, *The Last Supper*, DaVinci not only employs the usage of correct mathematical proportion and geometric space, but he portrays the humans as discrete entities with definite characteristics. Instead of converging into one massive entity arranged about Jesus, each of the apostles is interacting differently with their environment, much like a real individual would. This newfound appreciation for distinct characters in Renaissance art is not unique to DaVinci, or even Michelangelo; a plurality of art characteristic of the Renaissance displays characters much like human beings of the time: independent and clear entities.

Humanism is an idea derived from the Greco-Roman Classics, which reappears during the Renaissance (along with many other Greco-Roman ideals) to shift the focus to human individuals from a spiritual leader. In Michelangelo’s *David*, the personage is specific and manifest extraordinary detail and human individuality. Without the ability to see the statue, it is difficult to fully understand the attention to every minute element driven by a subliminal sense of hermeticism. Modern critics have called *David* a nearly perfect model of man, despite some of *David*’s intentional proportional irregularities. For example, despite standing at seventeen feet tall, the sculpture has an unusually large head and gargantuan hands. However, this discrepancy in the portrayal of absolute realism adds to the sense of visceral power that the towering statue already holds, and compounds the emphasis on humanistic ideology. Finally, it may be interesting to note that Michelangelo carved *David* from a block of supposedly worthless marble that had been sitting in a courtyard, exposed to the elements, for twenty-five years. While perhaps unintentional, even the origins of the statue’s materials are a telling detail of the humanistic ideology: Michelangelo obtained an apparently worthless piece of marble, an earthly element, and crafted a near-perfect representation of human greatness from the natural waste.

While the Renaissance was not focused entirely on religion as a way of life, religion still played an important role in influencing popular philosophy, as exhibited in art from the time. *The Creation of Adam* is a popular Renaissance-period painting depicting what appears to be a religious scene at the surface; God and Adam are portrayed with arms outstretched, both apparently reaching for one another, but upon intimate examination, one discovers that the two figures are not touching. Although the painting has Christian biblical elements, it is difficult to characterize the painting as a religious one inherently. Instead of acting as a work intended to praise God, there are many subtle impious tones to the print. The fact that the painting takes care to emphasize Adam’s individuality, as well as the individuality of the figures behind God, speak to the theory that the painting is not a godly one. Additionally, Adam’s affect is lazy and clearly without drive to reach the distance to be one with God, whereas God is straining himself to be with Adam. This religiously lackadaisical outlook is reflected in the attitude of the common man, who is no longer driven by religion as a means by which to live life. Notwithstanding, the crucial point is that, while religion was not the driving force of life for most, the Renaissance was not a time of godless atheists who rejected pious ideas and refused to let these ideas alter their work.

Although the simplicity of blanket statements addressing the Renaissance as a strictly secular period is tempting, the intricacies are far more complex in practice. Michelangelo and DaVinci are perhaps the most prominent artists of the Renaissance, and both created their most famous works depicting highly religious events. As such, it would be an arduous task to create an archetype wherein the Renaissance appears entirely temporal. Several events occur which undermine the Church’s authority both politically and in the minds of the people, which are one of the many causations of the pro-secular shift. Indeed, the Renaissance is a period that had a strong emphasis on individuality and overall human importance, but while less eminent than before, the Church played a significant role in shaping the art and culture of the time.