WHY ANOTHER BOOK ON THE ITALIAN RENAISSANCE?

A few years ago when I was engaged to teach a course on Renaissance Italy at the University of California, Berkeley, I was understandably thrilled. After dedicating many years to research on the Renaissance, I would at last have a chance to teach the history of this period that was closest to my heart, and from my own perspective. To begin with, the task of selecting readings was simple. I knew I would want my students to plunge directly into the many primary sources—Dante, Boccaccio, Petrarch, Machiavelli, Guicciardini, Castiglione, Cellini, and others—just as I had when I was a student. In learning history there is no substitute for the excitement and insight that you receive through contact with the original sources. All good teachers know this—it is no secret.

However, I also wanted a single, good secondary text that students could use for reference—something that would provide historical context, definitions of terminology, maps, and so on, all explained in clear, readable English. And it is here that I came across a dilemma. Though there is an abundance of works on Renaissance Italy, the more I looked around for a suitable up-to-date textbook the more frustrated I became. As I asked my colleagues what text they were using, I received a variety of answers. Some assigned general texts on the European Renaissance and made use only of those chapters that applied to Italy, while others assigned a variety of secondary texts, mixing and matching works on various Renaissance cities and political or social history. The rest admitted that, unsatisfied with current textbooks, they presented all background information for their students exclusively in their lectures.

I was not happy with any of those choices. I did not want to assign a number of secondary texts, because students’ hours available for reading and their budgets are not limitless. I also did not want students to rely exclusively on my lectures, because if I had to dedicate so much class time to setting up the social and political context of each source I would be left with precious little time to present the writings themselves. I also intended to show many images of Renaissance art, have students listen to music, and, most essential of all, to have time for discussion. In the end, I assigned Oxford’s Italy in the Age of the Renaissance. Edited by John Najemy, this excellent collection of thematic essays written by top scholars in the field is well-organized, complete with maps, a timeline, and a handy index. Though I would have preferred a text written by a single author providing a straightforward synthesis, this was the very best book available.

THE AUTHOR’S APPROACH

So, when Prentice Hall asked me to write A Short History of Renaissance Italy, I knew what was needed: to tell the story in a clear chronological narrative, so readers could follow political events as they unfolded. I also wanted to transmit a wider view of Renaissance Italy, one that stretched further over time and covered a broader swathe of cultural phenomena. Like Najemy, I wanted to encompass the vibrant thirteenth century, however, unlike him, and the majority of previous histories, my account of the Renaissance would continue through the sixteenth century, spanning the seventeenth and beyond. I also wanted to embrace all the artistic and cultural developments in Italy.

My editor had a vision that matched mine, both in periodization and in interdisciplinarity. I was to produce a concise, but engagingly written text; all I had to do was follow my teaching outline and tailor my lecture notes to fit into fifteen chapters. To keep costs down, we decided to eliminate costly illustrations and provide indications of online resources instead. However, the delicate trick that I try to pull off in the classroom—telling the political story, while interweaving intellectual trends in humanism, philosophy, science, and historiography; changing social attitudes toward religion, wealth, marriage, and family; not to mention all the stunning artistic achievements in
literature, poetry, painting, sculpture, architecture, music, and theater—was harder to achieve in writing than I had expected. All these factors contributed to the phenomenon we call the Renaissance, and I could not conceive of this book without them. However, just as in the preparation of the perfect ragù the balance of all the ingredients is crucial, yet varies with each cook, it is inevitable that to some tastes I will have occasionally under-salted or over-peppered the mixture—too much poetry, too little economics, too little architecture, too many female saints. The writing of history is always full of subjective choices, and although I have attempted to be comprehensive, this book inevitably reflects my own interests and expertise, or lack thereof.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK
You do not have to be taking a class to read this book. I have tried to provide background and define terms as I go along. If you have come to read this book of your own accord, without an instructor, you should have no difficulties following the text. If you are a student taking a course in Western Civilization or Art History, and this is a required reading, I hope at least this book does not overburden either your backpack or your wallet. In either case, because this book is only a “short history” as the title indicates, you may need or want more information than is included within any given chapter. This is why I have included suggested readings, websites, and media lists at the end of each chapter. Among these are some of the top scholarly contributions in the field; some are recent, some are much older, while others are much lighter, popular sources. Some of the suggestions are there simply because they are fun.

If you are a teacher using this text, I have a few suggestions for you. Here are some primary sources that can be assigned along with each of the chapters: Chapter 1, Dante Inferno; Chapter 2, Boccaccio Decameron; Chapter 3, Petrarch Letters and Sonnets; Chapter 4, Pius II Commentaries; Chapter 5, Alessandra Strozzi Letters; Chapter 6, Vespasiano da Bisticci Memoirs; Chapter 7, Lorenzo Valla Declamation on the Donation of Constantine; Chapter 8, Gasparo Contarini The Commonwealth and Government of Venice; Chapter 9, Pico della Mirandola Oration on the Dignity of Man; Chapter 10, Machiavelli The Prince, and Guicciardini The History of Italy; Chapter 12, Castiglione The Courtier; Chapter 13, Vasari Lives of the Artists, Michelangelo Poetry, and Cellini Autobiography; Chapter 14, Veronica Franco Poems; Chapter 15, Galileo “Letter to the Grand Duchess Christina”, The Assayer, and Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems. Obviously you will not assign every one of these texts; however, I have introduced and excerpted selections from each of these works within the chapters listed here and provided enough contextualization for students to embark on these readings on their own, before you have lectured on them. Wherever possible, at the end of each chapter, under “Resources” I have indicated websites that provide the texts free of charge. The single most valuable site for this is, without a doubt, the Hanover Historical Texts Project at http://history.hanover.edu, though there are many other sites dedicated to individual authors and texts. By using such internet sources, instructors can assemble virtual readers for their courses. This is especially useful when you might not want to assign the entire Decameron, for instance, but merely give students an idea of the flavor of the work. Other major works by Machiavelli, Castiglione, Cellini, and so on, are also available in inexpensive paperback editions and are to be found in plenty on the shelves of used book stores.

The only chapter that is not linked to any specific primary text is Chapter 11, “Paradoxes of the High Renaissance: Art in a time of turmoil.” Unlike other chapters, in which I attempt to blend cultural and political elements, this chapter is entirely about the visual arts. It seemed important to devote an entire chapter to this central element of the Renaissance; it also functions as a kind of intermezzo between the dramatic political events between 1494 and 1527. Professors of art history may well choose to skip this chapter entirely, as it is very sketchy, and present the material in their own, richer, more
highly specialized manner. For those whose specialty is not art history, this chapter works best if the subject matter is taught while showing images of the art described. This is easily accomplished by using a resource such as the Web Gallery of Art: http://www.wga.hu/ John Paoletti and Gary Radke’s *Art in Renaissance Italy*, Third Edition (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2006). provides superb supplemental reading.