

The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy by Jacob Burckhardt

Review by Walter S. Zapotoczny Jr.

In some ways Jacob Burckhardt's book is a disturbing look at a period that gave birth to the modern world. In other ways it is a refreshing account of forward thinking of the time. Burckhardt argues that politics was the source of the Italian Renaissance as Italy did everything it could to resist the Papacy and the Holy Roman Empire and evolved into micro-states. Burckhardt begins by commenting on them, "In them, for the first time we detect the modern political spirit of Europe, surrendered freely to its own instincts, often displaying the worst features of an unbridled egotism, outraging every right, and killing every germ of a healthier culture."

Burckhardt views the Renaissance through the writings of Niccolò di Bernardo dei Machiavelli. He looks at the despotism of the period and explains that the violent change that occurred in Italy was justified by Machiavellian idea of the ends justifying the means. According to Burckhardt, egotism was at the forefront of the rise of the Italian cities and that egotism began in war and politics and was carried into culture, the arts and the way in which people lived their everyday life.

Burckhardt's book causes us to think differently about the Italian Renaissance. The book presents a new look at the struggles between the Roman Catholic Church and the empire. We see that the Renaissance was not just the creation of fine art, innovation, and revitalized humanism. We are presented with the many aspects of the period that together were the Renaissance.

The book is organized into six parts. In Part One, we are introduced to despotism in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the influence of the Papacy and war as a work of art. In Part Two, Burckhardt delves into the individual and looks at what he characterizes as two sides of human consciousness – "that which was turned within and that which was turned without." Part Three introduces us to the influences of antiquity on the Italian Renaissance. Burckhardt argues that the Renaissance would not have been as significant had it not been for the influences of ancient Rome, the Classics, the Humanists universities and the many other aspects of antiquity that provided influences. In Part Four, Burckhardt suggests that having reached a "high degree of development and been schooled by the teaching of antiquity" the Italians reached out to discover other parts of the world and to investigate the sciences. Part Five introduces us to Italian social life to include music, domestic life, the equality of men and women and festivals which all contributed to the Renaissance. Finally, in Part Six, Burckhardt reviews morality and religion and how they influenced the thinkers of the time.

The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy adds to the historiography of the Renaissance period by providing an interpretation of the period that incorporates many of the social, political, religious, and individual influences that contributed to the Italian Renaissance. In this work, we see the flourishing individualism, political intrigue, religious struggle, and influences of antiquity that radically transformed politics, the arts and science.

We see a different picture than the one often presented about the Renaissance. We see how city-states of Florence, Venice and Rome and their creative individuals provided the foundations for the formation of a new form of society and provided the very foundations for the modern world. In this book, it appears that Burckhardt intended to describe the creativity of the men of the Renaissance. In doing so, he revealed the many faces of the men of the Renaissance and the many factors that contributed to the Italian Renaissance. He touched on all the major aspects of the culture of the Renaissance and gave the reader a thorough understanding of the period.

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