The Creation of an Age

What do books, gunpowder, the re-discovery of ancient culture and the plague have in common? Each, in its own way, contributed to the creation of the Renaissance, one of the most exciting, transformative times in human history.

"Renaissance" is the French word for "Renascita" the Italian term that 16th century biographer, Giorgio Vasari, used to describe the “rebirth” of the classical (Greco-Roman) style of art and architecture being used by the Italian artists of his day. It soon became the term used to describe the time period between 1350-1600 A.D. when the knowledge of the ancient Greek and Roman philosophers, artists and scientists was embraced and transformed by European culture. During this time, the infusion of this classical knowledge, which slowly began trickling out of the East during the Crusades, began to flow like a river throughout Europe. And this river of knowledge was the gift of a German printer named Gutenberg.

In 1448 Johannes Gutenberg, not only made available the Bible to the world, but his moveable type printing press also made possible the spread of the knowledge of the ancient philosophers throughout Europe. Prior to the invention of the printing press, the only books in Europe (mostly Bibles and religious treatises) were in monasteries where they had been slowly and painstakingly copied by hand. In fact, before 1450 only a small number of people outside the clergy could even read. Thus the advent of the press allowed education to move out of the monasteries and into a larger segment of the population. Within fifty years there were over 1,000 printing presses throughout Europe and over a million books in circulation; the world began to read.
Just as the printing press all but ended the feudal art of hand copying books, the Black Plague was the beginning of the end of the Middle Ages. In 1348 the Bubonic Plague rampaged across the face of the continent killing over one-third of the population of Europe. Though it struck both the rich and the poor, it was the peasant class that was hardest hit. Once the Black Death’s rampage was over, feudal lords found that they did not have enough serfs to tend their flocks and fields. In order to meet their labor needs, these noblemen had to begin paying workers for services that at one time were provided by serfs who were forced to work for no payment in exchange for protection from invaders. Soon serfs were earning enough money to buy their freedom and were following the freemen into the towns.

The final blow to the feudalistic way of life came in the form of cannons and guns. These weapons, which utilized gun powder, a Chinese invention, could easily penetrate a suit of armor or a castle wall. When feudal lords could no longer protect their servants against an invading army, the servants left for the cities seeking protection in numbers. The feudal system that had dominated Europe for the past millennium was crumbling apart along with its walls.

The lack of protection, along with the possibility of a freer, better life, soon resulted in the mass exodus from feudal manors to the streets of Europe’s rapidly growing towns. By banding together with others who shared the same skills, craft guilds, such as the goldsmiths’ and wool merchants’ guilds were formed. By sharing techniques, resources and friendships, members of the various guilds flourished in their new situations.
The most successful of these merchants and craftsmen created a moneyed class of citizens; they were not of noble birth, but their wealth, power and influence gave them equivalent status with, if not superiority over, the local nobility. The rise of the Medicis, Florence’s ruling banking family, is an example of the possibilities available to this newly created social class.

Not only did the growth of towns and cities throughout Europe elevate the fortunes of the merchant class, but it also elevated the European monarchies. During the Middle Ages it was the feudal lord with the most land holdings and loyal subjects who wielded the power in a country, not necessarily the King or Queen. (Eleanor’s father, the Duke of Aquitaine was actually wealthier and more powerful than the King of France.) But, with the invention of the cannon and the devastation left in the wake of the Black Plague, these lords had lost much of their power. It was the ruling monarch (king or queen) who was able to maintain an army and protect the people. They funded these armies (often mercenary armies available to the highest bidder) by taxing the citizens of the cities and countryside in exchange for protecting them. Soon one King and one court controlled one nation and powerful monarchs such as Isabelle and Ferdinand of Spain, Francis I of France and Elizabeth I of England entered the game of politics and power.

Further expansion of the power and the purse of the European monarchies came with the Age of Exploration. As the various countries engaged in a race to find the best overseas route to the East Indies, they discovered and colonized much of the world. These expeditions ultimately resulted in adding untold wealth in land and natural resources (especially gold) to the monarchies and their countries.
As the artistically limited Middle Ages faded into the background of history and the wealth of both the noble and the moneyed classes increased, so did their desire for the refinements of life. Their patronage of such great artists as Michaelangelo, Leonardo de Vinci and Raphael resulted in some of the greatest works of art known to humanity. These artists, along with many others, were inspired by the great writings and works of art available from the wonderful Golden Ages of Greece and Rome. The writings of the old philosophers the sculpture and architecture of the ancient masters- all filled the Renaissance world with awe and delight.

The discovery of the wisdom of ancient civilizations, the spread of this knowledge via the printing press, the inspiration gained through studying classical art, the collapse of the feudal system, the growth of the cities and the mercantile (moneyed) class, the exploration of the world and the rise of the European monarchies all played a role in the dissolution of the Middle Ages and the creation of that exhilarating, creative, inspirational, revolutionary time known as “The Renaissance”.

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