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Individualism over Time

Individualism is a concept that has varied through the ages and across different cultures. The division between Eastern and Western cultures must be made. In the east, the culture is more collectivist, putting the needs of the group above the needs of the individual.1 This essay will focus on Western culture and the rise of individualism during the Renaissance. Individualism is not merely about standing out, but rather about the desire to be unique in a world full of conformity. People are motivated to be different, and they are in many ways, but a substantial part of their everyday life is based on the same basic parts, such as eating, sleeping, or social interaction.

Before the Renaissance, there were a few people who were more individualistic, like Joan of Arc, but as a whole, society still was collectivist. Joan grew up as a normal, church-going woman from Domremy.2 When Joan began to hear the voices and started on her journey of leading the army, she became more individualist, but she never wanted to be an individual. Joan still tried to conform to some of the aspects of society, such as the desire to go to church. While she was more individualistic, she did not set out on her journey with the goal of making a name for herself. She thought she was following the will of God and that was all the motivation she needed to continue on with her journey. During her interviews, the only times she did not comply with the inquisitors was when it concerned a specific aspect of her visions, every other time she did what most people would do and answered the questions.3

Domenico Scandella, also known as Menocchio, a miller from Friuli, is an example of someone who stood out because he wanted to, but still was conforming to society. He tried to prove that he was smart and his ideas were correct to the inquisitors, but at the same time he knew that if he said the wrong thing he would die. Even when he was trying to be an individual and explain his ideas about religion, he still was aware of the inquisitors power over him and the risk he held if he said too much.4

During the Renaissance, people focused more on the individual. People during the time period were intent on finding who and what they were meant to be. Artists, writers, craftsmen, and philosophers sought to obtain societal admiration and created works that would immortalize their talents. Society became driven by individual desire and wants. Renaissance bureaucracy also sought to protect the individual more than the society.5

During the Renaissance, the artists were remembered for more than just their work. They were remembered for being eccentric and fickle. They were remembered for their personalities in addition to their works; they were individuals and strove to keep it that way.6 They became more than just their jobs and their work. The people got paid to make things that served no real practical purpose, except to show off how wealthy the patrons were. Before the Renaissance the majority of the artwork was in churches and cathedrals, during the Renaissance the artwork moved away from being completely about religion and into being about the individual and society.

In modern day Western society, individualism has become such an integral part society that being an individual has become the norm. During the Renaissance, being an individual was special and different, but in modern day everyone strives for individualism. There is nothing special in trying to be different when everyone tries to as well. If everyone tries to be unique, there is nothing exceptional in trying to stand out. Even artists in modern society are not as unique as they used to be. There are some exceptions, but most are always trying to further their names and raise their image. Because so many of them try to be the special one, it makes it hard for any of them to be that special.

Individualism is a hard topic to define and a harder topic to discuss. The idea that there was one set time when people because individualistic to say that was the point that individualism was born is ludicrous. There was a period of time during the Renaissance when individualism was clearly an aspect of society and culture, but over the course of time normal way of people act and interact has changed until being and individual is the norm, while trying to conform to the stereotypes of society is unique.

Endnotes

1 Wu Xiaojiang, “Culture Tradition and Culture Renewal,” *Prajna Vihara* (Thailand), Vol. 11, Iss. 1 (Jan.-Jun. 2010), 1-14.

2 Régine Pernoud, *Joan of Arc by Herself and Her Witnesses,* trans. Edward Hyams (Stein and Day Publishers, 1966), 15-29.

3 Ibid., 165-227.

4 Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms*, trans. John and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1980).

5 Marvin Becker, “Individualism in the Early Italian Renaissance: Burden and Blessing,” *Studies in the Renaissance*, Vol. 19 (1972), 273-297.

6 Rudolf Wittkower, “Individualism in Art and Artists: A Renaissance Problem,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (Jul.-Sep. 1961), 291-302.