

Final Essay Exam

Honors Foundations of Western Civilization

By Jillian Wright

Individuality is an idea about identification. Whether a person identifies with a group or with just themselves shows individuality. While being an individual has always been in history, it has also shifted in several different ways. Before the Renaissance people related more with groups of people, or with a religion rather than becoming more individualized. It is an argument that, “individuals only became aware of themselves separately from a general category during the Italian Renaissance.”¹ The shift the Renaissance created was a leap in creativity and in individual merit, with also a change in the church and how people were finally allowed to have untraditional ideas that were separate from the church. This was also aided by the printing press and the ability people gained to learn and read about new things, that were separate from the bible. While this was all happening a change in art was also captured and within that section of the Renaissance a lot of individuality was exposed. The Renaissance brought individualism out in a new way through new artists, varying religious views, and the spreading of new ideas.

The new artists that were able to come forward during the Italian Renaissance showed how new ideas and individuality were coming into place. Not only did new methods of painting and sculpting develop, but also the topics and ideas of the artwork changed. This not only shows that people were socially allowed to try new thing, but also effected the perspectives of the individual. Within this new individuality came, “ a distinctive Renaissance realism,” which not

¹ Geoff Baldwin, “Individual and Self in the Late Renaissance,” *The Historical Journal*, no. 2 (2001): 342.

only showed the new ideas of the people, but also connected what the individuals were feeling about the time period.² Not only was this a significant change from a more religious society, but it countered a lot of past ideas. The significant changes are shown in the way that religious figures were not always the main part to certain paintings and sculptures. This shows that the Renaissance did not only bring individualism to the surface, but it was a large societal modification. People like Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo not only let individuality show through the work they created, but they allowed for others to see that being an individual was acceptable.

Before the Renaissance having individual or unique ideas, especially skewed from the church itself, were not allowed and one could be punished severely. This is shown through the well known story of Joan of Arc, who was burned at the stake for her religious practices. It is also shown through the less known story of Menocchio, a miller who was tortured for his religious ideals.³ Both of these stories show the way people rebelled against the group oriented societal norms and had beliefs that were against or even slightly different than tradition, especially in religious settings. The shift of individuality is shown in how during the Renaissance Joan of Arc is cleared of all crimes that she was committed and killed for. This shows how the idea of being an individual with individual beliefs become a safe practice within the realm of religion. A realm that for an extreme amount of time was not touched. This not only represents the individual, it represents the growth of a whole society in terms of tolerance. Individualism

² Alastair Fowler, "Renaissance Realism: Narrative Images in Literature and Art," *Art Book*, no. 11. (2004): 45.

³ Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2013).

shifted within the Renaissance and continued to develop throughout the entirety of the time period following.

One thing that changed a lot more than just individuality within the Renaissance is the spreading of new ideas. This was achieved by the invention of the printing press. The printing press not only made information easier to gain, but it also gave lower class citizens the ability to read and write. With this whole new group of people entering a knowledge based world, it was then possible for people to create new ideas instead of following the opinions of the upper class. This not only allowed for individualism, but it let it thrive within the Renaissance time period. Individuality developed through a new invention that allowed more people to be educated, and with this new found knowledge opinions formed. These new formed opinions suggest that individuality could have been a factor before the Renaissance if the poor were more versed in literacy. The printing press pushed education and knowledge upon people, but it also mixed with, “the unity of Renaissance ideas of self and personality.”⁴ These two things combined and created an atmosphere that individualism could prosper and be accepted. Not only did the printing press explain why individualism occurred during the Renaissance, it also explains the different ideas of humanism and realism that were interpreted.

Individualism grew within the Renaissance period, and continued to grow afterwards. Not only is this idea shown in the artist that were allowed to create new methods and ideas, but also in the way people started to separate from the church. The spreading of different ideas through books and other writing after the creation of the printing press also can explain the way

⁴ Geoff Baldwin, “Individual and Self in the Late Renaissance,” *The Historical Journal*, no. 2 (2001): 347.

individualism grew. With new found knowledge people were allowed to be more original and to break away from the traditional groups that were the social norm. Not only did individualism thrive in the Renaissance, it changed an entire society of people. It allowed for new ideas and new discoveries, and created a new way of living. Individuality came out of the culture the Renaissance provided and the new ideas that were formed helped society become less of a group oriented world.