

A Modern Point of View

During the Middle Ages (a period of European history from the third through 13th centuries), art and learning were centered on the church and religion. But at the start of the 14th century, people became less interested in thinking about God, heaven and the saints, and more interested in thinking about themselves, their surroundings and their everyday lives. Part of this change was influenced by the study of ancient Greek and Roman writings on scientific matters, government, philosophy, and art. When scholars during the Renaissance began to study these writings, their interests turned away from traditional areas of study such as religion, medicine and the law. The people of the Renaissance became interested in other areas of science, the natural world, biology and astronomy. People now studied mathematics, engineering, and architecture. Artists, writers, musicians and composers began creating work outside of the church.

Artists signed their work and authors wrote autobiographies and memoirs — stories about themselves.

The values and ideals popular during the European Renaissance can be described by the term secular humanism: secular, meaning not religious and humanism, meaning placing the study and progress of human nature at the center of interests.

The rise of Humanism can be seen in paintings created by Renaissance artists. During the Middle Ages, saints in paintings wore halos (a ring or circle of light) around their heads. Artists also used hieratic scale in paintings during the Middle Ages, making saints or members of the family of God larger in scale than ordinary or less important figures. As Humanism became more popular during the Renaissance, ordinary people grew to be the same size as saints in paintings and saints began to look more like ordinary people. For example, halos became fainter and eventually disappeared during the Renaissance.

