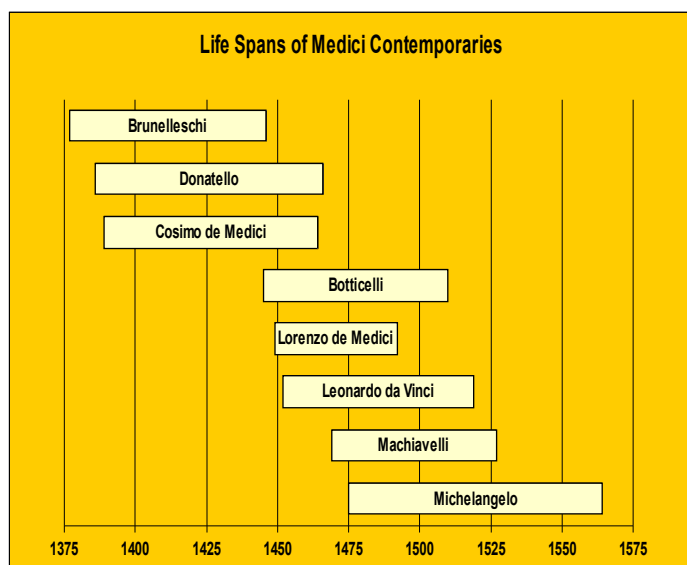


The Florence of the Medici in Context



The term “Renaissance” was a creation of 19th century historians trying to understand and explain what they saw as a dramatic break between the Middle Ages and the emergence of a distinctly modern European culture and mindset. The debate continues about the actual balance between historical continuity and change, and about whether the term Renaissance should be narrowed to focus on its Italian cultural roots or broadened to encompass a wider range of changes taking place throughout Europe during that period. But it was clear, even to contemporaries, that something extraordinary was happening during the 14th and 15th centuries in a handful of Italian city-states, and most especially in Florence, often called the “cradle of the Renaissance”.

Florentines were conscious of breaking with the past. Their showcase cathedral (begun in 1296) took eight generations to complete, but the plan adopted in 1366-7 called for a dome whose scale exceeded anything attempted in the last thousand years; a dome that no one actually knew how to build until Brunelleschi invented new tools and techniques some fifty years later. Bigger than the Pantheon and the Hagia Sophia, Florence's landmark dome was a fitting symbol of a society that measured itself against the rediscovered achievements of antiquity, rather than against the feudal and clerical traditions of what Petrarch called the “Dark Ages” that were so overshadowed by what came before and was coming after.

But why Florence? This landlocked city of barely 100,000 people seemed to have few natural advantages, but by the mid-14th century it had become the fifth largest city in an overwhelmingly rural Europe, after Paris, Venice, Milan, and Naples (and far ahead of Rome, which had shriveled from 1.5 million at its height to a mere 20,000). Its location on the banks of the Arno (as opposed to the more defensible hilltop locations of its rivals) exposed it to periodic floods, but also helped it become the center of a prosperous wool cloth industry that supported a growing population. Wealthy merchant families, like the Medici, established networks of trading and banking outposts that made Florence an influential hub of economic activity throughout Europe. Her currency (the florin) and her language (Tuscan) were widely adopted as international standards of exchange. She had one of the highest literacy rates in Europe, with perhaps a third of the males, and quite a few females, able to read.

Florence was also a pluralistic society, with strong guilds and wealthy merchant families overshadowing the landed aristocracy and creating an atmosphere in which competition and creative tension were the norm. The guilds provided a deep pool of specialized talent, which the competitive patronage of the wealthy directed toward new forms of secular and public art and architecture. (Donatello's David, completed around the same time as Brunelleschi's dome, was the first free-standing nude sculpture since antiquity.) Humanist studies, based on the rediscovery of Greek and Roman works, also thrived, benefiting greatly from the disruptive technology of the printing press. In the half-century following its invention (c. 1450), an estimated 6-15 million books in 40,000 titles/editions were published, more than had been produced in the previous thousand years by hand.

Luck also played an important role. In 1402 Florence was on the verge of being conquered by arch-rival Milan, when the would-be conqueror, Giangaleazzo Visconti, suddenly died, leaving Florence with both a great sense of relief and a belief in her own destiny. But shifting trade patterns and the rise of more powerful nation-states ensured that Florence's brilliance would be eclipsed soon enough.