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Social Studies

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Michelangelo *and* the Italian Renaissance

by Liz Murray

Genre	Comprehension Skills and Strategy	Text Features
Expository nonfiction	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Main Idea• Generalize• Summarize	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Headings• Captions• Glossary

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Vocabulary

achieved

architect

bronze

cannon

depressed

fashioned

midst

philosopher

rival

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Note: The total word count includes words in the running text and headings only. Numerals and words in chapter titles, captions, labels, diagrams, charts, graphs, sidebars, and extra features are not included.



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Has anything ever happened to you to make you change your mind? Between the years 1300 and 1600, things happened that caused many European artists, **philosophers, architects,** and scientists to change their minds dramatically. Historians now describe those events and the changes they caused as “the Renaissance.”

The new ways of thinking during the time of the Renaissance changed life in Europe. The changes were seen in architecture and poetry. In the sciences, too, people such as Galileo (pictured below on the right) caused many people to question their beliefs about humanity and the universe. Art was another area of great impact and change. Renaissance artists such as Michelangelo changed the world with their art!



Galileo & Viviani
by Italian artist
Tito Lessi

BEFORE THE CHANGE: THE MIDDLE AGES

Every period in human history is influenced by the attitudes and ideas of the time that came before it. The Renaissance was no exception. In European history the time before the Renaissance is called the Middle Ages.

The Middle Ages began around A.D. 500, after the fall of the Roman Empire. After the empire collapsed, Europe was plunged into a period of disorder.

The Roman Catholic Church responded to the disorder by becoming the new authority in people's lives. Its rules helped create stability. Its teachings gave people comfort. And its celebrations brought joy.

Artists and writers reacted to the Church's new role by focusing their works on religion. The great thinkers of the Middle Ages devoted their time to studying Church history and to teaching about its beliefs.



This French church was built during the Middle Ages.



The Parthenon in Greece and the Coliseum in Rome are examples of architecture that influenced the Renaissance.

THE CHANGE BEGINS: THE END OF THE MIDDLE AGES

With this new focus and organization, life in Europe seemed calmer toward the end of the Middle Ages. This improvement led to a major change in peoples' attitudes about what was important in life. During the Middle Ages, people focused more on religion, partly because it promised that their suffering would end. But with life in Europe getting better, people began looking to other things beside the Church.

Religion continued to play an important role in European life long after the Middle Ages ended. However, at the end of the Middle Ages, artists and scholars began to look back to ancient Greece and Rome for ideas. They felt that they had much to learn from what the Greeks and Romans had **achieved**. Interest in the work of Greek and Roman thinkers, writers, and artists fueled an explosion of new thinking.

A room in Florence, Italy. The Italian Renaissance was based in Florence.



THE ITALIAN RENAISSANCE

The ideas and styles of the Renaissance spread all over Europe. The Renaissance had a major impact in England, France, and Germany. But it had the greatest influence in Italy. It also began there.

As Italy was the birthplace and heart of the ancient Roman Empire, it made sense that Italy should be where the Renaissance first took hold. The palaces, public buildings, and cemeteries of Italy were filled with art and architecture created by the ancient Romans. Italians who were interested in learning more about the culture and history of ancient Rome could look to these artifacts. They inspired great Renaissance artists, such as Donatello, Michelangelo, Raphael, and da Vinci.

These artists, using the works of the ancient Romans for guidance, shifted the focus of art away from religion. Their paintings were less about religious teachings and more about the emotions and drama of everyday human life. Historians now use the term *humanism* to describe this style of art.

MICHELANGELO: THE STUDENT

Michelangelo is one of the most famous Renaissance artists. He was born in 1475 near Florence, Italy, to a family of bankers. Michelangelo was interested in art from an early age. When he turned thirteen, Michelangelo went to study with Ghirlandaio, Florence's greatest artist of the time. Michelangelo studied the art of the fresco. This method of painting on wet plaster became popular during the Renaissance.



Ghirlandaio's
*Madonna della
Misericordia*

Michelangelo's
Persian Sybil, from
the Sistine Chapel
Fresco Series



Detail of Lorenzo de
Medici, from the *Tomb of
Lorenzo de Medici*
by Michelangelo



Lorenzo de Medici,
patron of the arts

MICHELANGELO: THE SCULPTOR

Michelangelo was supposed to study with Ghirlandaio for three years. But he left after just one year.

As talented as he was, Michelangelo still needed other people to support him. So he went to study sculpture with financial assistance from Lorenzo de Medici, head of the Medici family.

The Medicis were one of Italy's wealthiest families. They used some of their fortune to fund talented artists such as Michelangelo. They did so through the system of patronage. Under this system, wealthy families sponsored promising young artists. Patronage led to the creation of some of the Renaissance's most famous sculptures, paintings, buildings, and works of literature.

While under the patronage of the Medicis, Michelangelo blossomed as a sculptor. He studied the family's collection of statues from ancient Rome to learn more about sculpture. The sculptor Bertoldo, a friend of the Medicis, taught Michelangelo during this time.

The Medicis' money did more than assist artists such as Michelangelo. It helped the family become the rulers of Florence. However, in 1494 a priest named Savonarola took power.

Savonarola created a serious problem for Michelangelo. The powerful priest hated the art of the Renaissance, feeling that it made people less devoted to religion.

Michelangelo left Florence when Savonarola rose to power. After a brief stay in Bologna, he moved to Rome. There he was able to study the ruins of the ancient Romans. The ruins inspired him to carve *Bacchus* in 1497. It was his first large-scale sculpture.

The people of Florence soon grew weary of Savonarola's rule. They overthrew the priest in 1498. Michelangelo returned to Florence in 1501.

Soon after Michelangelo came back, he received an opportunity to sculpt a fourteen-foot statue for Florence's main church. The statue would be of the biblical hero David. Michelangelo started work in 1501, using an old and damaged block of marble.

Michelangelo finished his *David* in 1504. The people of Florence loved it, hailing Michelangelo as a genius. To this day, *David* is Michelangelo's most famous sculpture. Except for da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, it is the most famous work of art from the Renaissance.



Ancient ruins in Rome

Michelangelo's *David*



Detail of Sistine Chapel

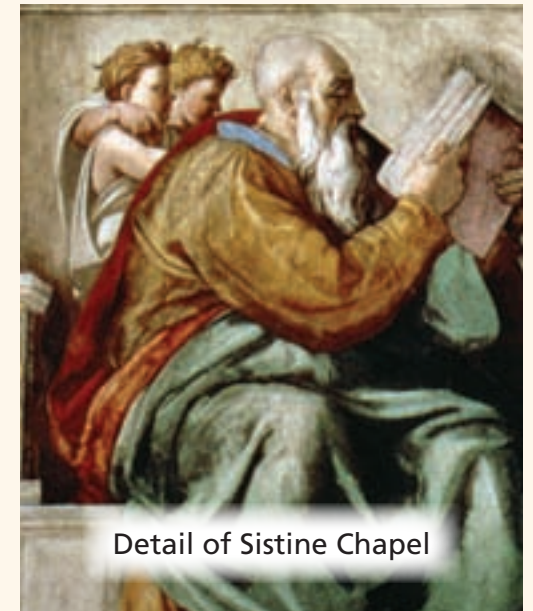
MICHELANGELO RETURNS TO PAINTING

The success of *David* made many people want to hire Michelangelo. In 1508 the Pope asked him to come to Rome. He had a special project for Michelangelo.

The Pope wanted Michelangelo to paint fresco scenes for the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in a part of Rome called Vatican City. In order to do the project, Michelangelo was forced to master the art of painting. He had given up painting early in life to concentrate on sculpture.

It was not easy for Michelangelo to learn how to paint again. At times the size of the project threatened to overwhelm him. Supposedly, Michelangelo became so frustrated early on in the project that he erased his work and fired all of his assistants. From then on, it is thought that he worked alone to finish painting the frescoes. He did have workers who laid plaster and mixed paints, however.

Michelangelo took four years to paint the Sistine Chapel ceiling. When it was done, people again hailed him as a genius. They marveled at the beauty and massive scale of the frescoes he had painted. The work still exists today. It has undergone painstaking restoration since the time of its creation.



Detail of Sistine Chapel

MICHELANGELO: THE ARCHITECT

In 1546 Michelangelo was made chief architect of St. Peter's Basilica, a grand church in Vatican City. At the time, St. Peter's was being rebuilt. The project had already lasted forty years. The people of Rome wanted Michelangelo to help finish the job.

Michelangelo was in his seventies when he accepted this huge assignment. This was during a time when few people lived to the age of fifty. Even more impressive, Michelangelo refused to be paid for his work. He believed he was fulfilling a duty to the Roman Catholic Church by working on St. Peter's Basilica.

Michelangelo's work on St. Peter's was as breathtaking as his sculpture of David and the Sistine Chapel frescoes. Many years later, its design influenced the design of the U.S. Capitol building in Washington, D.C., and other buildings throughout the world. However, Michelangelo died before he was able to complete the project.

Michelangelo was not perfect. When he became **depressed**, he would often leave his work unfinished. He was very critical of his patrons. Still, Michelangelo is rightly thought of as one of the great artists of the Renaissance. The following pages will explore the works of other great artists of the Renaissance.



St. Peter's Basilica in Rome

Donatello's
marble statue
of *David*



DONATELLO

Like Michelangelo, Donatello achieved fame for the marble and **bronze** statues he sculpted. Also like Michelangelo, Donatello was born in Florence and worked there. He, too, worked for the Medicis.

Donatello was born around 1386. His career as a sculptor began around 1400 when he first learned stone carving. His teachers might have been sculptors who were then working on Florence's main church. Around 1405 Donatello found work as a sculptor in the workshop of the artist Lorenzo Ghiberti. Ghiberti influenced some of Donatello's early sculptures.

In contrast to Michelangelo's art, Donatello's work showed a closer connection to the religious art of the later Middle Ages. Donatello specialized in statues of saints. Like Michelangelo, Donatello was famous for his statues of the biblical hero David. But Michelangelo's *David* was carved out of marble. Donatello **fashioned** one of his statues out of bronze and the other out of marble.

Donatello died in 1466. Although he did not achieve fame as an architect and painter, as Michelangelo did, he is remembered as one of the Renaissance's great artists because of his wonderful sculptures.

RAPHAEL

Unlike Michelangelo and Donatello, Raphael never worked as a sculptor. He spent some time in Florence and was influenced by its artists, but he was not born there.

Raphael was born in Urbino in the year 1483. By that time Urbino had become a center of the Italian Renaissance. Raphael's father, a painter, died when Raphael was only eleven. But before he died he was able to teach Raphael some things about painting.

By 1500 Raphael had moved to the city of Perugia, where he painted the inside of churches. Raphael's work attracted a lot of attention. He was already being called a "master."

In 1504 Raphael moved to Florence. There he studied the works of Michelangelo. Later on, when Raphael moved to Rome to paint frescoes in the private rooms of the Sistine Chapel, he became a **rival** of Michelangelo's.

Raphael's most famous work is *The School of Athens*. The painting depicts some of the greatest ancient philosophers, including Plato and Aristotle.



The School of Athens
by Raphael

LEONARDO DA VINCI

Michelangelo, Donatello, and Raphael were all great artists of the Renaissance. But none of them came to represent the Renaissance the way Leonardo da Vinci does. For many people, da Vinci is the Renaissance.

As a painter, da Vinci was one of the first Italian artists to experiment with oil paints instead of egg-based paints. Using oil paints allowed artists to layer colors and to cover mistakes. Leonardo created the famous *Mona Lisa*, which still attracts many visitors to the Louvre museum in Paris, France. Da Vinci also worked with the fresco method. His painting *The Last Supper* is one of the most famous frescoes in history.

Da Vinci was fascinated with the natural world. He had a passion for science and anatomy, and he studied the human body. His interest in science inspired his work as an artist, writer, philosopher, and inventor. Leonardo studied the nature of water, animals, and plants. He was especially interested in horses.

Leonardo da Vinci died almost four centuries ago. Like Michelangelo, Donatello, and Raphael, da Vinci was a great artist. Unlike the others, da Vinci is also well known for his achievements outside the arts.



Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*



Detail from a da Vinci sketch of a horse

WRITERS OF THE RENAISSANCE

The great writers of the Renaissance, like the great artists of that time, looked to ancient Greece and Rome for their inspiration. The poet Petrarch wrote romantic poems called sonnets to celebrate the great love of his life. One of Petrarch's friends, Boccaccio, is known as one of the Renaissance's great storytellers. His most famous work, the *Decameron*, is a collection of tales set in the **midst** of a plague called the Black Death. The Black Death was a deadly illness that killed many people during the Middle Ages.



Petrarch, Renaissance poet

Florence, Italy



Like a burst of fire from a **cannon**, an explosion of learning and discovery took place during the Renaissance. Inspired by ancient Greek and Roman civilization, Renaissance artists such as Michelangelo, Donatello, Raphael, and da Vinci brought about a new wave of creativity in Italy. Fresh ideas in painting and sculpture helped Renaissance artists show human life and emotion in new ways. Advances in technology and design allowed architects to reach new heights. Best of all, many of the finest works from the Renaissance, such as Michelangelo's *David*, are still around for us to study and enjoy!

Glossary

achieved *v.* accomplished something

architects *n.* persons who design and make plans for buildings

bronze *adj.* made of or similar in color to the type of metal made by combining copper and tin

cannon *n.* a big gun, especially one that is mounted on a base or wheels

depressed *adj.* very gloomy or sad

fashioned *v.* made something

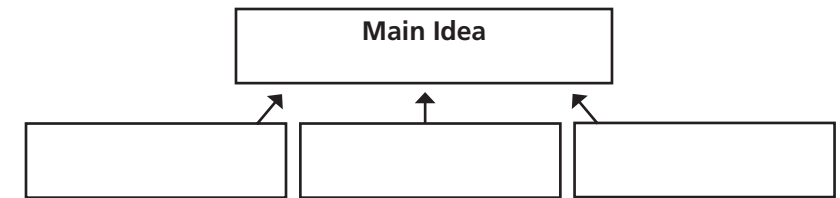
midst *n.* the middle of

philosophers *n.* persons who seek wisdom by observing the world and asking questions

rival *n.* person who attempts to do better than someone else at the same task

Reader Response

1. What is the main idea of the discussion about Michelangelo in this book? Using a graphic organizer like the one below, write down this main idea along with supporting details.



2. Write a paragraph summarizing the kinds of materials Michelangelo used to create his art during his career.
3. *Depressed* is a past-tense verb formed from the prefix *de-* and the base word *press*. Can you think of other words that are made by combining the base word *press* with a prefix? Write them down on a separate piece of paper and use a dictionary to find and list their definitions.
4. The style of Renaissance art called *humanism* is described on page 7. Which one of the images in this book do you think best displays this style? Why?