

OVERVIEW

The Northern Renaissance refers to developments in humanistic studies and art that occurred north of the Alps. The printing press played a pivotal role in spreading humanistic studies across the European continent from their source in Italy. The philosophy of Christian humanism was more prevalent in Northern Renaissance literature and art than it was in the Italian Renaissance.

WHEN DID IT HAPPEN?

It took time for Italian Renaissance humanism to spread beyond Italy, but by the turn of the 16th century, the invention of the printing press and an increase in global trade had helped to popularize humanistic studies in Northern Europe. Think of the Northern Renaissance as a 16th-century intellectual and artistic movement happening at the same time as the Protestant Reformation.

KEY TERMS**Christian Humanism**

Christian humanism merged humanistic philosophy with traditional Christian teachings. Christian humanists, such as **Erasmus** and **Thomas More**, used their knowledge of the classics to advocate for reforms in the Church and society.

Altarpieces

Altarpieces are works of art designed to be displayed behind a church altar. They were common in Northern Renaissance art before the Protestant Reformation. During the Reformation, many altarpieces were destroyed.

Printmaking

Northern Renaissance artists used the newly-invented printing press to mass produce visual art. *The Praise of Folly* and other popular books published by Northern Renaissance writers also included printed illustrations.

COMPARISON

*The Italian Renaissance and Northern Renaissance were **different** because...*

Northern Renaissance humanists were more religious and focused more on social reform, while Italian humanists were more focused on secular concerns and individual achievement.

*The Italian Renaissance and Northern Renaissance were **similar** because...*

Both Italian and Northern humanists studied the classics (Greek, Roman, and biblical literature) and modeled their writings after classical authors.

© Marco Learning, LLC. All Rights Reserved. Advanced Placement® and AP® are trademarks registered by the College Board, which is not affiliated with, and does not endorse, this product.

ERASMUS OF ROTTERDAM

Erasmus was one of the best-known proponents of Christian humanism. In his book, *The Praise of Folly*, Erasmus used the Gospels to criticize several Catholic Church practices, such as the wealth of the bishops. In the Gospels, the Apostles were poor. If the bishops sought to be like the Apostles (as they claimed to be their successors), they should be poor as well. In this way, Erasmus used a classical text in order to advocate for social reform.

Although Erasmus was a devout Catholic and never criticized the Catholic Church's doctrines, the publication of *The Praise of Folly* is often cited as a cause of the Protestant Reformation because of his criticism of the Church's corrupt practices.

Erasmus was a close friend of **Thomas More**, an English humanist best known for writing *Utopia*, in which he described a fictional perfect society. This text typified the Northern Renaissance because it criticized prevailing social norms, such as religious intolerance and capital punishment for small offenses like theft.



Erasmus of Rotterdam (1523) by Hans Holbein the Younger

NORTHERN RENAISSANCE ART

Northern Renaissance artists developed a style that emphasized realistic portrayals of people in natural settings performing everyday tasks. Like Italian Renaissance artists, they incorporated the three-dimensional perspective and the latest advancements in human anatomy, but with less emphasis on idealized human forms and color schemes. **Altarpieces** and other religious compositions were also more prevalent in Northern Renaissance art than in Italian Renaissance art.



The Harvesters, by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, portrays agricultural workers engaged in everyday tasks.