

### **Was the Italian Renaissance rooted in Byzantine art/culture/society?"**

I believe that the Italian Renaissance was "based upon" Byzantine art/culture/society, as they played a decisive role in inspiring the life of the Italian Renaissance. With the fall of the Roman Empire in Italy in 476 A.D., a significant amount of both Greek and Roman achievements were lost or forgotten during "the long age of barbarianism" that ruled over much of the Western world (The Renaissance, 1999). Brian Pavlac states that "during the Middle Ages, knowledge of Greek had been virtually lost" (Pavlac, pg. 195). In the Italian Renaissance, the Western civilization rose out "of the medieval darkness and to recover the ancient arts," and had a renewal of some of the Greek and Roman accomplishments (The Renaissance, 1999). The main source of influence for the Italian Renaissance was that the "Western curriculum [began] drawing on help from scholars fleeing the collapsing Byzantine Empire," and expanded the program of the West to restore ancient Greek literature (Pavlac, pg. 195).

The Italian Renaissance had begun in the early 1400's, about fifty years before the Byzantine capital, Constantinople, fell to the Turks in 1453 (Pavlac, pg. 122, 194). The influence of Byzantium was present far before the beginning of the Italian Renaissance, as it began from the reign of the Byzantine Emperor Justinian the Great. The boundaries of the Byzantine Empire extended over much of the Italian peninsula in his successful campaigns, as by the time of his death in 565 A.D., "the empire bordered nearly the entire Mediterranean Sea, a size unrivalled in Byzantine history from that point onward" (Timeline of Art History, 2009). The Emperor Justinian was particularly interested in Italy and North Africa, as his eyes were set on the "reconquest of the empire's former western territories," where he restored several of the city's status, such as the former capital city of the Western Roman Empire, Ravenna.

One of the most distinguishing aspects of the rule of the Byzantine Emperor Justinian the Great is found in the “exceptional record of architectural and artistic patronage and production” throughout his vast imperial empire of Byzantium (Timeline of Art History, 2009). The Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities continues describing the crucial role “both direct and indirect” of the Byzantine culture in Italy and is identified all through the age of late antiquity and the middle ages. The evidence “of Byzantine artists at work within Italy can be found and Byzantines were clearly often seen as masters to be copied” (TORCH, n. date).

The architectural advancements are seen in the crown of his endeavors, the Hagia Sophia (translated in English as “Holy Wisdom”). The “cathedral’s revolutionary new design” is an evident example of the Byzantine Emperor Justinian, as he also incorporated the Byzantine architecture into Italian cities that “set a standard in monumental building and domed architecture that would have a lasting effect on the history of Byzantine architecture” throughout all its lands (Timeline of Art History, 2009). Here can be found the monumental Mosaic portraits of the Emperor Justinian along with his wife and the Empress, Theodora, who “appear there at the Church of San Vitale” (Timeline of Art History, 2009). Thus, there was already a profound influence on Italian culture before it even began its renaissance according to modern chronological timelines of this period in history. “Byzantine art had long exercised enormous influence in the Italian peninsula, not least because it was not until 1071 that the Byzantines finally lost their last territories in Italy” (TORCH, n. date). It should be noted that the Byzantine era took place recently just before the era of the Italian Renaissance, and conceivably even extended into the beginning of the renaissance.

By the 1380’s, the Byzantine Empire was in shambles as it only “consisted of the capital of Constantinople and a few other isolated exclaves” (Lumen, n. date). With the demise of the

Byzantine Empire already evident, there became many Byzantine refugees in the Italian peninsula. Not only was Italy the nearest safe destination, but it likewise presented “a vibrant and progressive atmosphere which many Byzantine intellectuals contrasted [(compared)] favourably with their own ancient traditions and civilization” (Byzantines in Renaissance Italy, 2002). By the 1390’s, some prominent and educated Byzantines had given lessons and revitalized the Greek language that the citizens of Italy so enthusiastically wanted to learn (Byzantines in Renaissance Italy, 2002). One such Byzantine was Manuel Chrysoloras, who came to Italy, though, as an emissary for the Byzantine Emperor and the struggling Empire. Nevertheless, while he was in Venice, word soon got out that he was learned in the Greek literature when he gave a few lessons in Greek to a pupil, who in turn told of this thrilling experience to the Chancellor of Florence (Byzantines in Renaissance Italy, 2002). The Chancellor of Florence, Coluccio Salutati (1331-1406), was so impressed “that he decided to secure Chrysoloras's services, and in 1396 invited him to teach grammar and Greek literature at University of Florence” (Byzantines in Renaissance Italy, 2002). It is important to note that Italian Renaissance began in the 1400’s at this very city of Florence. Chrysoloras had taught there right before the very start of the Italian Renaissance and, despite that Chrysoloras only taught in this position from 1397 to 1400, these years had a “a tremendous effect” on the rise of the renaissance.

Several of Chrysoloras’ students were among the leading figures in the restoration in the Italian Renaissance of Greek studies, such as Guarino da Verona and Pallas Strozzi (Byzantines in Renaissance Italy, 2002). Furthermore, evidence from *The Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities* (TORCH) states that the Byzantine influence on the Italian culture and art was present long before this, as Vasari’s emphasis on the Italian artist’s ways “indicates just how

deep was Byzantine influence on Italy’s artistic culture” (TORCH, n. date). This was because every Byzantine that continued their education past fourteen years of age in the Byzantine Empire would be taught the works of ancient Greek artists, historians, poets, philosophers and dramatists that were preserved in the Eastern Roman Empire (Byzantines in Renaissance Italy, 2002). These had been wiped out and were lost or forgotten in the west by the Germanic barbarian’s conquest, and so with these works, they would have been “the envy of many educated Italians, who were now starting to take an interest in ancient Greek literature” (Byzantines in Renaissance Italy, 2002).

However, the influence of the Byzantine culture did not only present early influence on the Italian peoples but strengthened between the era of the Emperor Justinian and the Renaissance. The sack of the Byzantine capital of Constantinople in 1204 was a devastating blow to the strength of the empire and caused a number of Byzantines to immigrate to Italy, inspiring the start of the Renaissance along with others already present, until the rest of the Byzantine refugees arrived with the fall of the Constantinople to the Turks in 1453 (Khan Academy, n. date). These immigrants who came to Italy after the year 1204 and again after the year 1453 included a wide range of educated individuals, ranging from Byzantine scholars and artists, to philosophers, politicians, and scientists (Khan Academy, n. date). The mass departure of the Byzantines from their once mighty empire to chiefly the Italian Peninsula was a very influential factor in the revitalization of the studies of ancient Greece and Rome, as it “led to the development of the Renaissance in humanism and science,” along with bringing their familiarity of their own Greco-Roman culture and civilization (Byzantine culture and society – Khan Academy, n. date). At the year of 1478, the population of Venice had such a Greek, and a rapidly

growing population, that it provoked Cardinal Bessarion to comment “that Venice was 'almost another Byzantium’” (Byzantines in Renaissance Italy, 2002).

In the 16th century Italian Giorgio Vasari’s book, called *Lives of the Artists*, it describes the Italian painters, sculptors, and architects, which is the original sense of the word, renaissance: “it described a development in the arts” (“The Renaissance” - ORB, 1999). It was only by the 18<sup>th</sup> century that historians included literature and philosophy. Consequently, the most reputable aspect of the Renaissance is art, especially in painting, as they no longer looked like “flat and almost cartoonish” images but took on deep characteristics and “realism” (“The Renaissance” - ORB, 1999). This is the distinguishing trait of “humanism,” which Byzantine immigrants helped ignite one of most defining accomplishments of the Renaissance era (“The Renaissance” - ORB, 1999). With this new interest in this style of art, they “wanted to improve or expand on those ideas and achievements” and produce the magnificent art that can be found in Italian Renaissance. An intriguing example of deep and profound Byzantine influence on the Italian Renaissance is that of “iconographic pedigree for Michelangelo’s sculpture [which] exists in some Byzantine images” (Michelangelo and the Politics of Art, pg. 124). This was not the only renowned painter of the Italian Renaissance as the painting of the talented Raphael, the “School of Athens,” is yet another example of the Graeco-Roman influence that had been inspired and revitalized by the Byzantines artists/painters/sculptures (“The Renaissance” – ACSPD, n. date). Lastly, the Italian Duomo cathedral in the Florence, commonly known as Santa Maria del Fiore cathedral, is another magnificent example of the Graeco-Roman influence prominent in the cities central to the Italian Renaissance (“The Renaissance” – ACSPD, n. date). In light of these facts and discoveries, I agree with *The Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities* that it is not very

surprising that Italian masters in Renaissance, such as the illustrious Michelangelo, “should have been inspired and indeed trained by Byzantine artists and models” (TORCH, n. date).

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