

FAMOUS MEN OF THE  
**RENAISSANCE** &  
**REFORMATION**



SECOND EDITION

by **ROB SHEARER**



Famous Men of the  
**RENAISSANCE &  
REFORMATION**

*by Robert G. Shearer*

Greenleaf Press  
Lebanon, Tennessee

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# Author's Preface

This book has been fun to write. It has confirmed for me the wisdom and utility of beginning a study of any historical period with a background in biography. History is after all, about people. And as much as certain modern scholars like to crow about the debunking of the "great man" theory of history, it remains true that certain men (and their ideas) have had more impact and far-reaching influence than others. One needs to understand the important people in order to understand the times. And then one must achieve a deeper understanding of the times in order to understand the important people.

The student who reads these 29 chapters about the lives of 35 or so famous men should come away with a sense of what the periods called the Renaissance and the Reformation were about. It will not, of course, be a complete picture. But it will be a foundation that can be built upon.

I have tried to show the true character and personality of each individual. It has been my conscious intent to avoid painting individuals as heroes or villains. But I have tried to be careful to indicate and include the character flaws of the admirable and even the occasional virtues of the less-than-admirable.

Two criticisms may be leveled at the book from a perusal of the table of contents. First, some will wonder why that group of Reformation Christians known as the Anabaptists are given such prominent coverage. The prominence in this collection (two chapters out of fifteen devoted to the Reformation, three if you include Müntzer) was because of what I believe to have been their unjust obscurity in other treatments of the period. The Anabaptist movement, while always a minority, was much more widespread geographically and more significant politically and theologically than most treatments of the times would at first suggest. The continued attention devoted to rooting them out by



authorities throughout this period is but one reason why they deserved a more thorough treatment than they have elsewhere received. Second, some will wonder why there is no discussion of the reforms instituted within the Roman Catholic Church, the so-called Catholic Reformation (or in the older historiography, the Counter Reformation). Although there were genuine reform movements within the church throughout this period, and the "shock troops" of the Catholic Reformation, the Jesuits, were founded in 1540, the true impact of reform within the church was not felt until the second half of the 16th century. I have already resolved, in the next volume of biographies, to devote some chapters to reform with the Roman Catholic Church. The obvious first chapters for the next volume will be Loyola, Philip II, William the Silent, Queen Elizabeth, and Henry of Navarre.

I have tried to show in this volume the continuity between the Renaissance and the Reformation. The revival of learning which characterized the Renaissance led directly to the recovery of the tools and texts that the Reformers used to place the Bible in the language (and hands) of the people. It is an old saw, but true, that "Erasmus laid the egg that Luther hatched."

Almost all of what I have written here is necessarily dependent upon the research of others. I have indicated my main sources in the bibliography at the end. For my introduction to the period and love of history, I owe a great debt to two scholars. First, to Dr. W. Brown Patterson, Dean of the faculty at the University of the South. Dr. Patterson was my undergraduate advisor and sponsor as a history major at Davidson College. Dr. Patterson earned degrees in Renaissance literature, theology, and history and gave me my first introduction to many of the figures I have written about here. More than just an academic advisor, he was also the priest at St. Albans' parish church which I attended. He also helped to officiate at the service in which Cyndy and I were married. Studying the history of the English Reformation while worshipping using the prayer book which was born in that struggle was an exhilarating and humbling experience. It helped me to realize that the issues of the Reformation were still very much alive. My second great scholarly debt is to my graduate advisor, Dr. Lewis W. Spitz of Stanford University, the dean of Luther studies in America. It was Dr. Spitz who guided me through a rigorous program of study and research to familiarize myself with the medieval antecedents of both the Renaissance and the Reformation, and it was his own seminal insight on the relationship between the "three generations of humanists" and the Reformers that helped me to appreciate the connections between those two movements



often stereotyped as being at odds. It is no fault of Dr. Spitz's that I never completed my doctoral dissertation, but I hope the fruit of my reading and reflecting on the period in this book is some small consolation.

There are a number of other "famous men" whom I would have liked to include in this work. Selection is always an extremely difficult process. Some were left out for lack of easily accessible resources. Some were left out because their lives overlapped others so much that telling their tale would have been redundant.

In particular I would have liked to have included a chapter on Sir John Hawkwood, the English knight and veteran of the wars in France, who became a mercenary captain in Italy and is honored in Florence by an equestrian statue. I would have liked to have done a chapter on Johannes Reuchlin, the leading German Hebrew scholar and author of a Hebrew grammar used throughout Europe - especially by Luther, Tyndale, and Calvin. I had also thought I would do a chapter on Philip Melanchthon, Luther's learned associate. Melanchthon was Professor of Greek and New Testament at Wittenberg and a great-nephew of Johannes Reuchlin. Unfortunately time, space, and duplication of the events of Luther's life ruled it out. And I had thought I would do a chapter on Martin Bucer, the Dominican monk, admirer of Luther from 1518 on, reformer of Strasburg, mentor of Jean Cauvin, and advocate of toleration towards the Anabaptists. He was forced to flee Strasburg in the 1540's when it was conquered by Charles V, and went to England where he taught Theology at Cambridge and helped Cranmer in the composition of the English Prayer Book. But again, time, space and duplication of the events of Calvin and Cranmer's life seemed to make it better to leave him out.

There is obviously a wealth of additional material that even the beginning student of this period will want to consult. But as an introduction (for students in the elementary grades, high school, and even college) I think this set of biographies may help to intrigue, inform, and begin to form impressions and understanding.

Finally, I must thank my family for their patience as I struggled through the drafting of these chapters. Many of you will know that the work on this book was delayed for almost a year when my wife, Cyndy, suffered with two broken arms from a horseback riding accident. This book was important to me, but I hope readers will understand that taking care of my wife of 19 years ultimately took higher priority. She has, nevertheless been very patient with me and my grumpy moods as I have been bogged down from time



to time over the past year. The children also have been very understanding - though they have had to be reminded regularly that Dad's office is not open for casual visits during office hours - especially when I'm writing! Our oldest three have been far enough along in their schooling that they have been able to read some chapters as they were drafted and their feedback has been important. This is a better book for the input and assistance of Cyndy, Jon, Micah, and Jeremy. Paul, Rachel, Hannah, and Jessy gave me lots of hugs and encouragement. As is always the case, the errors, omissions and dumb sentences are mine. The insights and finely worded phrases have usually been suggested to me by others.

I hope that through reading this book, readers will get a better sense of the events that helped to shape the church and an appreciation for the men and women of tremendous ability and often unbelievable courage who were at work in the events of the Renaissance and the Reformation. Let us admire them for their virtues and seek to imitate them, and take caution from their flaws and failures and seek to avoid them. That, after all, is the point of studying history.

— **Rob Shearer**  
**July 25th, 1996**

*between the birthdays of Rachel (7/7/1989) and Jessy (8/8/1993) and waiting for the birth of Emily Joy and the arrival of our daughter from China.*



# Famous Men of the RENAISSANCE

The Middle Ages were not the “Dark Ages.” Yet there had been substantial changes in Europe from 500 to 1300 AD. Rome and her Empire fell. The Germanic tribes moved into the old Roman provinces and established feudal kingdoms. Many of the Roman cities declined in population or were abandoned. Gradually, much of the literature and learning of the classical world was lost and forgotten.

Around 1300, in the towns of northern Italy especially, a group of men began to devote themselves to the recovery and revival of the classical world. Petrarch and his friends were interested above all in recovering the polished, ornate, classical Latin of their hero and model, Cicero. Gradually, the interest in the classical world expanded to include the other ancient languages of Greek and Hebrew. The writers, academics, and artists who shared these interests were called humanists. The name of their party comes from the style of education that they favored — what they called the *studia humanitatis*, or humane studies. They wanted to reform the university program which focused almost exclusively on logic and recognized only a narrow range of authorities, above all, Aristotle. The humanists stressed the importance of rhetoric, the art of speaking and writing persuasively. “Aristotle may define the good, but Plato motivates one to be good.” In place of Aristotle, the master of logic, they wished to substitute Plato and Cicero, the masters of rhetoric.

The following fourteen individuals are representative of the movement called the Renaissance.



## Chapter 1

# Petrarch 1304-1374



Petrarch was born at the end of the Middle Ages, in 1304, in the northern Italian city of Florence. His father was a minor government official. Petrarch's time in Florence was short, however. When he was only four, his father wound up on the losing side of a political quarrel and the family was forced to leave Florence. The family settled in northern Italy where Petrarch's father found work in the service of the Pope as a secretary and notary.

When Petrarch was six, the family was visited by Dante Alighieri, another exile from Florence who had been a friend and ally of Petrarch's father. While in exile Dante wrote one of the most important works of late medieval literature, *The Divine Comedy*. In *The Divine Comedy*, Dante described hell, purgatory, and heaven. As he described each place, Dante passed judgement on both his friends and acquaintances from Florence as well as historical figures from Greece and Rome. He placed each of them in hell, purgatory, or heaven and described their punishment or their reward.

Petrarch grew to admire Dante as he grew older. His father's friend had a strong influence on him, both as a writer and as a moralist. Petrarch shared Dante's admiration for important figures from Greek and Roman history. At an early age, it became clear to Petrarch's parents that their son would have great skill as a writer.

When Petrarch was about 10, political unrest in Rome forced the Pope to move to southern France. Petrarch's father moved his family to France, hoping to continue in the service of the Pope, since he was still forbidden to return to Florence.



When Petrarch was 12, his parents sent him to study law at the University of Montpellier in southern France. He seems to have enjoyed the university at first, but he quickly became disenchanted with the study of law. He later described it as an attempt to master “the art of selling justice.” He began to neglect the lectures and courses on law and spent more and more time reading the classics of Roman literature — works by Virgil, Seneca, Julius Caesar, and above all, Cicero.

Eventually, Petrarch’s father heard that he was neglecting his studies and paid a visit to his son. He threatened to burn his son’s books by Roman authors, but relented when Petrarch burst into tears and begged him not to. Nevertheless, Petrarch’s father decided to send his son to another, more prestigious university at Bologna in northern Italy in hopes that he would complete his study of law. Petrarch was 16.

In Bologna, Petrarch and his younger brother Gherardo, studied law for seven years, though Petrarch later called this time “seven wasted years.” Once again, he spent much of his time reading his favorite Roman authors. He also practiced writing Latin compositions in imitation of them. His favorite author was Cicero, a Roman lawyer, orator, and Senator whose Latin style was both polished and persuasive. Grudgingly, Petrarch also continued to study law, and learned how to represent clients, draw up contracts, and make presentations to a judge. He still disliked the legal profession intensely.

In 1326, both of Petrarch’s parents died. He and his brother left Bologna and returned to their home-in-exile in Avignon, France. He refused to practice law. Instead he took small jobs as a secretary with different officials at the court of the Pope. During this time, he and his brother began to lead the lives of elegant young men-about-town, much concerned with clothes and hair, and admiring the young women of Avignon.

One day, in Avignon, Petrarch had what he described as a “vision.” While attending early morning church in April of 1327, he saw a young woman whose beauty immediately captivated him. He believed he had never ever seen anyone so lovely. Her name was Laura. For twenty-one years, she was his inspiration for poetry and prose. The theme of his writings became his eternal, unrequited devotion to Laura.

As time went on, he gradually began to acquire a reputation as one of the most gifted writers in Europe. He wrote romantic poetry, always about Laura, in Italian. In Latin, he wrote summaries of his favorite Roman writers — above all, Cicero — and letter after



letter to an ever-widening circle of friends and acquaintances. He was proud of his skill as a writer and was pleased when friends complimented him. The high point of his reputation came in 1341, when his friends in Rome arranged for him to be crowned poet laureate in the ruins of the old Roman capitol. It was a title that had not been in use for almost a thousand years. Petrarch was 37 years old.

At the height of his fame, however, Petrarch became disillusioned with his life. He found that his own fame failed to satisfy him. His love for classical literature and language made him long for the lost power and grandeur of ancient Rome. The contrast between Rome's earlier glory and the current confused state of Italian politics saddened Petrarch deeply. At about the same time, his close relationship with his younger brother changed as well. Gherardo had experienced his own vision of a beautiful woman. But when the "Laura" of his vision suddenly died, he renounced the world, entered a monastery and took a strict vow of silence.

Petrarch sat down, and reflecting on the course of his life, wrote a remarkable book. He called it the *Secretum*. It is set in the form of a dialogue between Petrarch himself, and St. Augustine who acts as a stern father-confessor. Augustine accuses Petrarch of having wasted his life in worldly affections. Petrarch re-examines his love for Laura and concedes that it has not always been pure, but insists that Laura has inspired him to live a better life. Then Augustine accuses Petrarch of caring more for his beloved Roman authors than he does for Christ. To this charge, Petrarch answers:

"The highest part of my heart is with Christ. When it comes to thinking or speaking of religion, that is, of the highest truth, of true happiness and eternal salvation, I certainly am not a Ciceronian or a Platonist, but a Christian."<sup>1</sup>

In 1348, Laura herself died of the plague. Petrarch was crushed.

Petrarch spent the rest of his life writing and traveling. He devoted much of his time to collecting manuscripts of Roman authors which had been preserved at monasteries in Italy and France. He began to be interested in Greek writers, known to him because his favorite Roman authors quoted them. In particular, he became interested in Plato, since he was quoted often by Cicero. After he acquired a manuscript, in Greek, by Plato, he searched, unsuccessfully, for someone who could help him master classical Greek the way



he had mastered classical Latin.

In 1359, while staying in Milan, he was visited by the writer Boccaccio, whom he liked immediately. He and Boccaccio resolved to find a scholar who would translate Homer's epic poems, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* in Latin. In this, as with Plato, he was also disappointed. He moved for a time to Venice, then, settled finally in Padua.

Petrarch spent the last fifteen years of his life enjoying his reputation as a poet and champion of classical Latin. He corresponded with friends at the universities and courts of Europe, encouraging them in their study and revival of all things from classical Rome and Greece. He also wrote letters to his ancient heroes, Cicero & Livy. His admiration and longing for the lost grandeur of Rome was intense. To the Roman historian, Livy, he wrote:

"I would wish either that I had been born in your age, or you in ours. I should thank you, though, that you have so often caused me to forget present evils and have transported me to happier times. As I read, I seem to be living amidst Scipio, Brutus, and Cato. It is with these men that I live at such times, and not with the thievish company of today, among whom I was born under an evil star."<sup>2</sup>

Towards the end of his life, he was visited by four young scholars from the local university who were not very appreciative of his status as a classical scholar. They shocked him with their curt dismissal of both Paul and Augustine. They thought Aristotle, and his Arab commentator, Averroes, the only writers worth reading and studying. In response, he wrote a treatise entitled, *On His Own Ignorance and that of Many Others*. In it he was sharply critical of the teaching of Aristotle in the universities. He disputed the medieval notion that Aristotle was the greatest of the philosophers. He argued for the favorite philosopher of his Roman heroes, Plato. Petrarch argued that although Aristotle might be preferred by a greater number of authors, Plato is preferred by the greater men.

Finally, on a warm summer morning in July of 1374, the day before his seventieth birthday, Petrarch's servants came in to find him slumped over at his desk. He had been working on his *Life of Julius Caesar*, written in classical Latin, when he died.



Some years before his death he had written a letter to those who would read about him after his death:

“Francesco Petrarca to Posterity, Greeting.

Perhaps you will have heard somewhat about me. Perhaps, too, you will wish to know what sort of man I was. Youth ensnared me; early manhood carried me away; but old age corrected me, and by experience taught me the truth of which I had read so often — that youth and pleasures are vanity. I devoted myself to a knowledge of antiquity, for this age of ours I have always found distasteful, so that, had it not been for the love of those dear to me, I should have preferred to have been born in any other. And so I strove to forget the present and join myself in spirit with the past.”<sup>3</sup>

### Sonnet 231

Life hurries on, a frantic refugee,  
And Death, with great forced marches, follows fast,  
And all the present leagues with all the past  
And all the future to make war on me.  
Anticipation joins to memory  
To search my soul with daggers; and at last,  
Did not damnation set me so aghast,  
I'd put an end to thinking and be free.  
The few glad moments that my heart has known  
Return to me; then I foresee in dread  
The winds upgathering against my ways,  
Storm in the harbor, and the pilot prone,  
The mast and rigging down; and dark and dead  
The lovely lights whereon I used to gaze.

— (translated by Morris Bishop)<sup>4</sup>



## Chapter 2

# Giotto 1267-1336

**G**iotto was born in 1267, in a small village about 14 miles from Florence. His parents were peasant farmers, and Giotto grew up accustomed to all the chores of a farming family. But Giotto was always interested in more than just farming. He was always fascinated with nature — plants, animals, & scenic views — and he was always drawing pictures of what he saw.

When Giotto was about 10, his father made him responsible for the care of a flock of sheep. Since the sheep were relatively self-sufficient, Giotto had lots of free time for his favorite activity — drawing. He drew on flat rocks with pieces of charcoal. He drew with sticks in the dirt and sand. One day, while Giotto was making a sketch of one of his sheep on a flat rock, a passing traveler stopped to admire his work, impressed with the realistic, lifelike details of Giotto's sketch. The traveler was one of the most famous artists of his day, Cimabue. He introduced himself to Giotto and asked if he would like to come and work with him in his workshop in Florence. Giotto replied, "If my father will allow it, I would willingly come and work with you." Giotto's father quickly gave his consent.

In Florence, Giotto quickly became Cimabue's star pupil. It was not long before the skill of the pupil equaled and then exceeded his teacher. A story from Giotto's apprenticeship illustrates how vivid, lifelike, and natural his painting was. One day, when Cimabue left the workshop, Giotto went to a portrait just finished by his master and painted a fly on the nose of the figure. When Cimabue returned to the workshop, he tried several times to shoo the fly away with his hand before he realized that his pupil had played a prank on him.





Madonna by Cimabue



Madonna by Giotto



St. Francis Gives His Cloak to a Stranger by Giotto

After he reached his 20's, Giotto began to receive independent commissions to paint frescos and portraits. These were almost always of scenes described in the Bible, or from the lives of Christian saints. They usually were intended to decorate churches or monasteries. The churches of Florence each had many chapels, many paid for by leading families. Each of these families wanted their chapel to have the most impressive artwork. Giotto was much in demand.

With each commission he completed, his reputation grew. Word reached him from the northern Italian town of Assisi. The Vicar General of the Franciscans had a special commission for him. The head of the Franciscans wished Giotto to paint the life of St. Francis, 32 panels in all, on both walls of the central sanctuary of the Franciscan orders' mother church. This work occupied Giotto for several years, but when he was finished, the panels were masterpieces. In these panels, Giotto showed that he had mastered the realistic portrayal of human forms in natural settings. The dramatic presentation of the various incidents of the life of St. Francis is vivid and arresting. As soon as they were completed, young painters and admirers began flocking to Assisi to admire them. They are still coming, 700 years later!

Word of his accomplishments reached the Pope in Rome, who was looking for an artist to execute several paintings at the cathedral of St. Peter. Pope Boniface VIII dispatched an emissary to Florence to make inquiries concerning Giotto as well as a number of other prominent artists. He interviewed patrons, inspected completed paintings, and collected drawings from each artist to take back to Rome so the Pope could make his final selection. When he asked Giotto for a small sketch to take back to Rome so that the Pope could evaluate his work, Giotto had an unusual response. He took a sheet of paper and a brush dipped in red paint and with one stroke painted a complete circle. Handing the sheet to the emissary, he said "Here is your drawing. Send it along with the others and you will see whether or not it will be understood."



When the Pope and his advisors heard the emissary's description of how Giotto had painted the circle before them with one stroke, they realized just how far Giotto surpassed all the other painters of his time in skill. The Pope invited Giotto to Rome. There he executed a number of frescoes and paintings in St. Peter's and for the Pope's residence, though few have survived. After a number of years in Rome, the Pope died and Giotto's commissions were not renewed by his successor. He traveled briefly to Naples in southern Italy and then spent time painting commissions in churches in Rimini, Ravenna, Arezzo, and Padua.

In 1334, Giotto, now in his 60's, was summoned to Florence and offered the prestigious position as the head of the Florence Cathedral workshop. Here he was given charge of the planning for the grand new cathedral, its bell tower, and all the artwork that would adorn the interior and exterior. The work continued long after Giotto's death, but his design and plan for the bell tower (*Campanille*) have long been admired. The bell tower uses three different shades of marble to highlight and decorate its vertical lines. Giotto's original plan seems to have called for a four-sided pyramid to be constructed at the top of the square building, but this was never completed.

*Giotto's Belltower,  
Florence, Italy*



Giotto's tenure in Florence did not last long. He died in 1336 and was buried in one of the churches in Florence. Succeeding generations of artists in Europe were inspired by him and admired his work. Giorgio Vasari, in his *Lives of the Artists* describes him as "born to give birth to the art of painting."

Over a hundred years after his death, the Medici family in Florence commissioned a marble bust of Giotto and had it installed in the church of Santa Maria del Fiore, with the following inscription:

"I am that man by whose deeds painting was raised from the dead, my hand as ready as it was sure. My art lacked nothing that nature herself did not also lack. No one has painted anything better or more completely than I did. Do you admire a beautiful tower resounding with sacred sound? By my design this tower reached for the stars. But I am Giotto, why cite such deeds? My name alone has inspired many a poem."<sup>5</sup>





Lamentation over the Dead Christ by Giotto



## *Chapter 3*

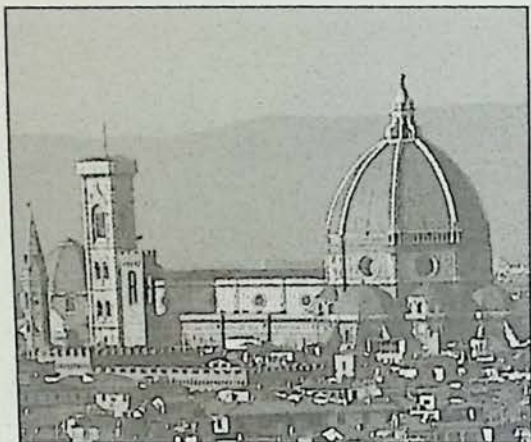
# Filippo Brunelleschi 1377-1446 and Donatello 1386-1466

**T**owards the end of the Middle Ages, the city of Florence, in northern Italy, acquired an excellent reputation for the fine quality of the cloth it produced. Skilled craftsmen in Florence bought wool from shepherds in the northern Italian countryside and turned it into yarn and then wove it into beautiful wool cloth. Merchants sent out by the city bought fine silk and cotton in the Middle East and brought it back where it was dyed and finished for export all over Europe.

As Florence's fame and prosperity grew, she began to send representatives farther and farther away to buy raw materials for her cloth trade and to sell the fine finished goods. These traveling merchants became very wealthy. In order to make their trade easier, they also invented many of the features of modern banking — especially the ability to deposit money with an office in one city and withdraw it from an office of the same bank in another city. By 1300, the merchants and bankers of Florence were among the richest people in Europe. Florence itself, with a population of about 100,000 was the largest city in Europe.

In 1290, the leading citizens of Florence, led by the officers of the wool guild, decided that the city needed a new and larger cathedral. They wished to show their gratitude to God who had blessed them and caused them to prosper. They also wished for a large cathedral which would show the rest of northern Italy just how prosperous Florence was. The building they planned was designed to be the largest church in Europe. It eventually took almost 200 years to finish. The old cathedral was torn down and the foundations





*The Duomo in Florence*

laid for the new structure on a truly grand scale. The plans called for a central dome which would span an open vault more than 130 feet across above the altar where the two wings of the church nave crossed. By 1400 they were ready to start the dome. But no one knew how to build such a large, free standing structure. No dome on this scale had ever been built. The priors of the city (the elected leaders of the city) announced a competition to select the man who would oversee the building of the dome. The man who successfully completed the building of the dome would be hailed as the greatest

architect of Europe.

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Filippo Brunelleschi was born in 1377 to a wealthy family of Florence. His father was a notary — similar to a modern lawyer. He drafted contracts and carried on correspondence for his employer with employees and partners in cities all across Europe. Filippo's father trained him in his own profession and although Filippo was quite bright and clever with words, his father's profession did not appeal to him. Filippo liked to work with his hands. He liked to draw. He liked to analyze anything mechanical in order to understand how it worked. Bowing to his son's natural inclinations, Filippo's father apprenticed him to a goldsmith. Filippo very quickly mastered the art of working with gold and silver and precious stones. From there he progressed to designing and building fine and beautiful clocks.

Then, while still in his early 20's, Filippo decided he wished to master the art of sculpture. He became close friends with a young teen-ager named Donatello, already considered the most talented sculptor in Florence. Donatello shared what he had already learned about sculpture with his friend Filippo. Together they studied the examples of ancient Greek and Roman sculpture which had been brought to Florence.

One day, Donatello took his friend Filippo to the Church of Santa Croce in Florence to admire a wooden crucifix which he had just completed. Filippo admired the craftsmanship of his friend, but criticized the design. "The figure you have carved is not that of Jesus, the son of God. It looks more like a peasant," he said. Donatello was cross and snapped that Filippo ought to "take some wood and make one yourself." Filippo made no reply but later began



work on a crucifix of his own. Some weeks later, he met Donatello in the market. Giving him the groceries he had bought, he asked Donatello to take them to his home and he would follow shortly, after he had made a few more purchases. When Donatello entered the house, he was stunned by the finished crucifix which Filippo had left in a prominent place in the entryway. He stood in the doorway, staring at the carved figure, and so forgot himself, that he dropped the milk, eggs, and cheese he had been carrying for Filippo in his apron. When Filippo arrived a few moments later, he found Donatello still transfixed, staring at the crucifix, with the smashed eggs and spilled groceries at his feet. "Now how can we have lunch, since you've spilled everything?" asked Filippo. "I've had enough," said Donatello. "It is for you to make Christs, and for me to make peasants!"

Shortly after this, the city officials decided to commission new bronze doors for the baptistery. The baptistery was a small, separate building, sort of a chapel in which baptisms were conducted — it stands next to the cathedral in Florence. They asked Filippo, Donatello, and another young man, named Lorenzo Ghiberti (who was to be Filippo's life-long rival) to each cast a single bronze panel on the same theme, "the sacrifice of Isaac." Ghiberti was 23, Filippo was 24, and Donatello was 15. These young men had already acquired reputations as the most gifted artists in Florence.

When each had finished their panels, they were all brought to the city hall to be placed together and judged. When the panels were revealed, Filippo and Donatello both agreed that Ghiberti's panel showed the best design and the best execution. Together, they persuaded the city council to award the contract for the doors of the baptistery to Ghiberti. The council asked both Donatello and Filippo to assist Ghiberti in the project, but they both declined (although later, both Donatello and Filippo helped Lorenzo in polishing and finishing the doors).

Filippo later said he had refused because he wished to find some craft or skill in which he could be the very best — not second-best. He persuaded Donatello to accompany him to Rome so that they might study further the art, sculpture, and architecture of the ancient Romans. He sold a farm which had been given him by his father, and taking the proceeds with him moved to Rome, where he stayed for six years.

The ruins of classical Rome fascinated and amazed Filippo. No other city in Europe had buildings like these! The Romans had a wealth of knowledge about architecture and construction that builders in the Middle Ages had forgotten. Filippo set out to make a systematic study of all the buildings of the ancients. He and Donatello sketched each building, wall,



and arch from a variety of angles. They measured the dimensions of foundations meticulously. Where foundations had been partially buried, they took picks and shovels and dug them out. The people of Rome didn't quite know what to make of these two young men who spent every day among the ruins.

After a year or so, Donatello returned to Florence, but Filippo stayed in Rome. As he continued to study the ancient buildings, he decided that he would devote himself to a revival of the art of architecture. At some point, he resolved that, by studying the art of the Romans, he would find the solution to the problem of completing the dome of the cathedral in Florence.

Filippo's studies in Rome had another important effect. By carefully comparing the measurements that he and Donatello had made with the sketches they had done of the appearances of the ancient buildings, Filippo was able to work out a precise understanding of the technique of perspective. The use of perspective in drawing is what makes objects farther away appear smaller and objects closer appear larger. Filippo realized that square objects, with parallel lines in three dimensions appear to have lines that converge on the horizon when sketched in two dimensions. His measurements and skills at geometry allowed him to use perspective in his drawings in a way that produces a startling realism.

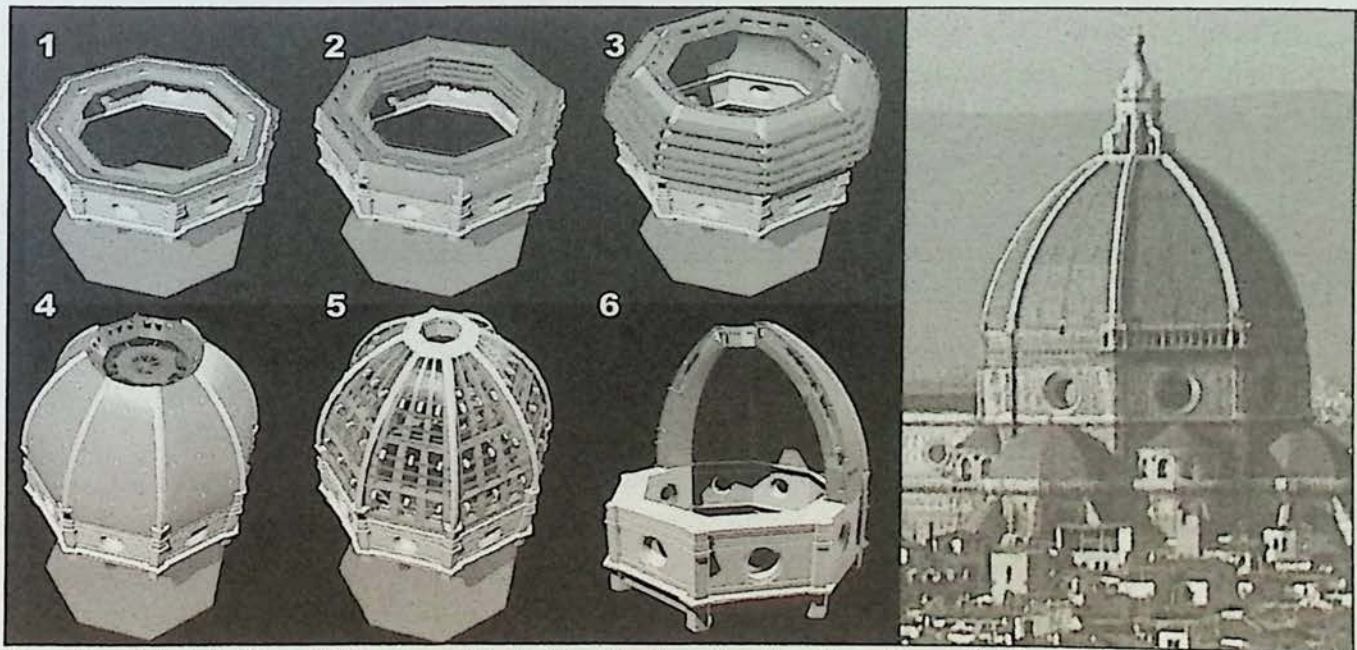
In 1407 Filippo returned to Florence. He was now 30 years old. He shared with Donatello and other artists his discoveries on perspective and they quickly learned and adopted his technique. He spent some time assisting Ghiberti in the completion of the bronze panels for the Baptistery doors. But again and again, he returned to the site of the unfinished cathedral in the center of Florence and studied the unfinished, open space, which waited for a dome. He talked to carpenters and stonemasons, all the while formulating his plan. He spent time working on additions being made to several of the smaller churches in Florence, and perfected the art of completing a vaulted, domed ceiling without costly supporting wood framework.

In 1420, the priors announced that they would award the commission for completing the dome of the cathedral to whichever architect demonstrated that he possessed the best technique and judgement for completing the work. Many foreign engineers and architects were invited by Florentine merchants and bankers throughout Europe to come to Florence to compete for the job. When all had assembled, the priors invited each one to present his ideas. All sorts of wild ideas were put forward. One engineer proposed filling the cathedral in with dirt to support the arches of the dome while they were being built. Asked how he



would go about removing the dirt when the job was finished, the imaginative engineer suggested that bags of valuable coins should be placed inside the dirt mound. Then the public would be invited to remove the dirt, with permission to keep whatever coins they found.

Only Filippo proposed that the dome could be built without any supporting framework, pillars, or dirt. The priors were skeptical. The other engineers and architects scoffed. The priors were not convinced by Filippo's arguments. The rival engineers and architects demanded that Filippo produce the model of his proposed dome which they knew he had been working on in secret to show how he planned to build it. Filippo refused. Filippo objected to his competitors that once he showed them how he planned to build the dome, they would all steal his carefully thought out plans. Finally, Filippo produced an egg and announced that whoever could stand the egg upright on a marble slab should be given the job of building the dome. Each of the other masters tried in turn, but none of them could make the egg stand up. Finally, they asked Filippo if he could do it. Filippo took the egg and tapped the larger end against the marble, cracking and partially collapsing it. He then stood the egg upright on its cracked base. The other artisans began to complain loudly that any of them could have done the same thing. Filippo laughed and replied, "Yes you could, **AFTER** you had seen it done. Just as, **AFTER** you have seen my model, you will all know how to build the dome." The priors awarded Filippo the contract.



*Brunelleschi started with scaffolding around the inside of the dome (fig. 1); as the walls were built upwards the inner scaffolding supported the inward-sloping walls and scaffolding was added on the outside (figs. 2 & 3); as the dome progressed, the scaffolding was able to span the narrowed distance within the inner shell (fig. 4); Fig. 5 shows the interior structure of the dome including the vertical ribs and six horizontal iron chains which strengthened the structure. The dome is complete except for the lantern; Fig. 6 is a cutaway showing the double-shell construction of the dome. On the right is a photograph of the completed dome.*



For sixteen years, Filippo directed the work on the dome. He was meticulous in supervising all the details of construction. He designed and had constructed all the frames and scaffolding and hoists needed to bring the material up for the construction of the dome. When he noticed how much time was lost during the break for the mid-day meal, he had several wooden structures constructed on top of the cathedral walls with complete kitchens where the workmen could get a hot meal and purchase wine and other refreshments. Filippo went to the kiln where the bricks were manufactured to inspect the clay. He went to the quarry where stones were being prepared to make sure they were not cracked. He gave the masons and stone-cutters detailed models of how each joint and fitting were to be constructed.

About 1430, impressed with his success in guiding the construction of the dome, Filippo was approached by the leading (and wealthiest) citizen of Florence, Cosimo de' Medici. Cosimo asked Filippo to supervise the completion of a church which Cosimo's father had begun. Filippo revised the building plans and took over the construction. His good friend Donatello was commissioned to decorate the interior of the church with stuccoes, carvings, and bronze panels on the doors. Cosimo was so pleased with Filippo's work on the church that he next commissioned him to design and construct a grand home for the Medici family.

From then on, to the end of his life, there was no shortage of building projects for Filippo to work on. One of his last designs was for the cupola which was to be built on top of the dome over the cathedral. Filippo completed the design before his death, but the cupola itself was not finished until 1482, thirty-six years after he died, in 1446.

After he died, the Florentine historian Giorgio Vasari described Brunelleschi in the following way:

“Nature has created many men who are small and insignificant in appearance but who are endowed with spirits so full of greatness and hearts of such boundless courage that they have no peace until they undertake difficult and almost impossible tasks and bring them to completion, to the astonishment of those who witness them.”<sup>6</sup>



## Chapter 4

# Lorenzo Valla 1407-1457

About the time Donatello was studying the ruins of ancient Rome, Lorenzo Valla was born there. He was quickly recognized as a prodigy. He was born in Rome in 1407 and mastered classical Latin at an early age. He studied Petrarch's letters and shared Petrarch's admiration for Cicero. After mastering the complexities of classical Latin, he turned his attention to another ancient language, Greek. This was somewhat unusual for the time, because the Greek language was largely unknown in Europe, being almost as difficult for scholars then as Egyptian hieroglyphics would be centuries later. But Valla persisted, and by seeking out the Greek-speaking representatives of the Eastern Emperor and the patriarch of Constantinople, he managed to master the Greek language. He became so accomplished in Greek translation and composition that he was sought after by the Pope and prominent Cardinals in their dealings with the Byzantine (or Eastern Roman) Empire.

Valla wrote a number of essays which contributed to his fame as a learned scholar. One of his first compositions was a dialogue between a Stoic, a Christian and an Epicurean titled, *Concerning the True Good*. His reputation as a scholar of classical Latin was established with a handbook he published in 1444 called *Elegances of the Latin Language*. He discussed in detail the rhetorical art of speaking and writing persuasively using the classical, Ciceronian Latin style. A great deal of the work was devoted to the art of choosing exactly the right word. Although two words may be synonyms, they often carry different connotations. For example, "order" and "series" both mean a succession of things, but "order" implies a plan and "series" does not. For several generations, Valla's book was the style guide for all serious writers of classical Latin.



Valla also used his knowledge of the classics to write several philosophical works. One of the most important was his essay, *On Free Will*. In this essay he argued strongly that predestination and free will do not contradict each other, nor does God's knowledge of the future mean that human beings are not free. He had to admit that there were some concepts that troubled him, but concluded that "We stand by faith, not by the probabilities of reason."

Perhaps Valla's most important work was his *Annotations to the New Testament* in which he examined the style of Jerome's translation of the New Testament into Latin. Because of his skill with the Greek language he was able to correct a number of misreadings and mistakes which Jerome had made.

In 1440 Valla wrote his most sensational work entitled *The False "Donation of Constantine."* This was an analysis of the document used by the Pope to justify his secular authority over the city of Rome and the territory in central Italy known as the Papal States. This document, known as *The Donation of Constantine*, was supposed to be a grant of the city of Rome (and outlying provinces) made to Pope Sylvester by the Emperor Constantine the Great (the first Christian Emperor) when he moved the capitol of the Empire to Constantinople in 330 A.D.

Valla analyzed the document and criticized it because it did not seem likely that an Emperor in 300 A.D. would have made such a grant, or that the Pope would have accepted it. But then Valla went further. By a close analysis of the words and style used in the document, he showed that it could not have been written in 330 A.D. but was a forgery — created 500 years AFTER Constantine had left Rome, most likely around 800 A.D.

Eighty years later, a German monk you will read about later in this book said that Valla and Wyclif were the two men who most influenced his ideas about the condition of the church and the authority of the papacy.



## Chapter 5

# Cosimo de' Medici 1389-1464



In the chapter on Filippo Brunelleschi, we saw how Florence had prospered because of its cloth trade. As the cloth merchants ranged over Europe and the Mediterranean they developed most of the features of modern branch banking in order to carry on their trading. Many of the cloth merchants became quite wealthy and over time their activities as bankers became more profitable than the cloth trade.

The government of Florence was organized around the guilds of the various professions. There were 21 guilds in all. The most important ones were the lawyers, wool merchants, silk merchants, cloth merchants, bankers, fur merchants, and finally, the sellers of spices, dyes, and medicines. Florence was governed by a council, which was supposed to be selected at random from all eligible members of the twenty-one guilds. Six members of the council came from the seven prominent guilds. Two came from the other fourteen guilds. The ninth member of the council was its most important, called the *Gonfaloniere*. The *Gonfaloniere* led the council and thus the city. The members of the council, including the *Gonfaloniere*, were supposed to be chosen at random from among all eligible guild members. In practice however, the wealthiest families of Florence managed to ensure that only the names of their allies and supporters made their way into the leather bags from which the random selections were made.

One of the wealthiest families to emerge from the cloth trade and international banking was the Medici of Florence. By 1400, the Medici had become the wealthiest of a whole



class of prosperous merchants in Florence. Florence, itself, was not the largest city in Europe (London, Paris, Rome, even Venice had a larger population), but it was one of the richest. There were other prosperous families in Florence — the Alberti, the Ricci, and the Spini — but the Medici had an advantage that they did not. For the Medici had become the bankers for the Pope.

In the early 1400's, the head of the Medici family was named Cosimo. Born in 1389, Cosimo received a classical education at a monastery school in Florence. Studying with teachers who were devoted followers of both Dante and Petrarch, Cosimo acquired a deep respect for classical learning and classical ideals. He began to collect classical manuscripts of Greek and Roman authors at an early age. But his education was also practical. His father and uncles taught him the family banking business — in which he soon showed great skill. As a young man in his 20's, Cosimo spent three years managing the family's banking business in Rome.

The Medici were very active in the politics of Florence, but they almost always remained in the background. They were the wealthiest family in the city, but Cosimo's father realized that many could easily become envious of their wealth and power if it were too prominently displayed. On his deathbed, he advised his son Cosimo:

“Do not appear to give advice, but put your views forward discreetly in conversation. Be wary of going to the *Palazzo della Signoria* [the town hall]; wait to be summoned, and when you are summoned, do what you are asked to do, and never display any pride should you receive a lot of votes... avoid litigation and political controversy, and always keep out of the public eye...”

Soon after his father's death, Cosimo saw the wisdom of that advice. His rivals began to stir up trouble and used rumors of the great wealth of the Medici to arouse envy and resentment. In 1433, Cosimo's rivals managed to elect a council that was composed of their allies and Cosimo's enemies. Cosimo was arrested and for a time it looked as if he might be executed on trumped up charges of conspiring with enemies of the Florentine Republic. Some skillful political maneuvering and a few well-placed bribes managed to reduce the sentence to banishment for Cosimo and other prominent members of the Medici family.



Almost exactly one year later, in 1434, Cosimo, with the assistance of the Pope, engineered a reversal of his political fortunes. A new council was elected, the sentence of banishment on the Medici was revoked, and this time it was the rivals of the Medici who were banished. For the next 30 years, Cosimo managed political affairs in Florence. During that time he worked most often behind the scenes, as inconspicuous as possible. Only three times during the 30 year period did he hold the office of Gonfaloniere. As one of his friends observed, "whenever he wished to achieve something, he saw to it, in order to escape envy as much as possible, that the initiative appeared to come from others and not from him." A contemporary historian observed, "He had a reputation such as probably no private citizen has ever enjoyed from the fall of Rome to our own day."

In 1439, Cosimo and Florence played host to one of the most important church conferences in several centuries — a general council of the Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches. The council was attended by Bishops, Archbishops, and Cardinals from all the important cities of Europe and the Mediterranean and the East. After all the delegates had assembled in Ferrara in 1438, they accepted an invitation from Cosimo d'Medici to move the council to Florence in 1439. Attending the council were not only the Bishops, but the Pope, the Patriarch of Constantinople, and the Eastern Roman Emperor himself.

The council had been called at the insistence of the Eastern Roman Emperor. His kingdom had shrunk in the last 30 years and the Ottoman Turks were now threatening the city of Constantinople itself. The Eastern Emperor wished desperately for military assistance from the Roman Catholic west. He hoped the council would come to an agreement on reunification between the eastern and western churches.

After some months of delay, an agreement was reached. It was announced in Latin by Cardinal Cesarini and by Archbishop Bessarion in Greek. Then the Italian cardinal and the Greek archbishop embraced each other and, joined by all the other delegates and the Eastern Emperor, they knelt before the Pope. But the celebrations were premature. The agreement reached in Florence was denounced widely and strongly by Greek Orthodox church leaders when they learned its terms, and the promised military assistance from the West never materialized. Fourteen years later, in 1453, the last Eastern Emperor died in battle as the Turks breached the walls of Constantinople and overran the city.

There were lasting effects from the council in Florence. Several of the Greek scholars



who had traveled with the Eastern Emperor were persuaded to remain in Florence and continue their instruction in classical Greek and on the study of Plato — who had long been overshadowed in the medieval universities by his pupil, Aristotle. Cosimo was so taken with Plato that he founded a Platonic Academy in Florence and installed a promising young student, Marsilio Ficino as its head. For years, Cosimo paid all of the expenses of the academy out of his own pocket — enabling Ficino to devote his time to his studies and to translate all of Plato's writings into Latin. But Cosimo's support was not simply financial. He often met with Ficino and they would discuss Plato and questions of philosophy for hours at a time.

In addition to supporting the Platonic Academy, Cosimo spent huge sums acquiring manuscripts for his library. Agents of the Medici banks all through Europe were constantly on the lookout for manuscripts of Greek or Latin authors. Eventually, Cosimo owned thousands.

Cosimo was also a patron of the arts. His father had been one of the priors of the cathedral who had commissioned Ghiberti to cast the bronze doors for the baptistery. Cosimo continued his support for the construction of the cathedral and the completion of its dome, but he lavished most of his church-building support on the Dominican monastery of San Marco. The prior of the monastery became a close friend of Cosimo's. Over the course of thirty years, Cosimo paid for the monastery to be almost completely rebuilt — at a fantastic cost. When the monks once protested that he was giving too much, Cosimo replied, "Never shall I be able to give God enough to set him down in my books as a debtor." Cosimo asked his friend the prior to set aside one of the monk's cells for his own use and he often spent time in the monastery in reflection.

In addition to the money that Cosimo spent on rebuilding the Dominican monastery, he also commissioned a wonderful series of frescoes to adorn the walls of each monk's cell as well as the halls and meeting rooms of the monastery. These frescoes were painted by a monk who became known as Fra Angelico — "Brother Angel." He was a small and saintly friar, who had been encouraged by Cosimo to use his skill in painting to depict scenes from the life of Christ. Cosimo was very interested in all of his paintings. He talked with Fra Angelico about the details and composition of each fresco. For the Chapter House (where all of the monks assembled for worship and for official meetings), Cosimo and Fra Angelico decided that the walls should be decorated with a fresco depicting *The Crucifixion*.



Every morning before he began work on *The Crucifixion*, Fra Angelico would kneel in prayer. Each day, as he worked on his portrayal of Christ's suffering on the Cross, he would be so overcome with emotion that tears would pour down his cheeks. He was a man of simplicity, modesty and holiness, exemplifying the monastic ideal in a way which few other monks did. It is said that his fellow friars never saw him angry.

For his own cell in the monastery, Cosimo asked Fra Angelico to paint the *Adoration of the Magi* so as to have the example of the kings laying down their crowns at the manger always before him.

Cosimo was also the patron of several other important artists of the Renaissance — none of them with so admirable a character as Fra Angelico, but gifted painters none-the-less.

Donatello (the friend of Brunelleschi) was a special favorite of Cosimo as was Fra Filippo Lippi. Lippi was another monk who was a brilliant painter. But his life had almost none of the admirable qualities of Fra Angelico. He was a liar, a cheat and a fraud — as well as being a notorious chaser of women! His paintings, though, were among the most beautiful of the Renaissance. He trained a generation of artists in his workshop in Florence, among them, one important young artist named Botticelli. Cosimo winced at many of Lippi's escapades. He frequently chastised the artist for his immoral behavior and tried to reform him, but continued to support him with gifts and commissions because of his talent as an artist.

Finally, a word should be said about Cosimo's devotion to his grandchildren. No matter how busy Cosimo was — or how important the business might seem — Cosimo always had time for his grandchildren. One story will suffice to illustrate his devotion to them. One day, Cosimo was discussing some important matters with a delegation from another city when one of his grandchildren came into the room and interrupted the conference to ask his grandfather to make him a whistle. The meeting was immediately adjourned and Cosimo set to work. When one of the delegation com-



The Adoration of the Magi by *Fra Angelico*  
Painted for Cosimo's cell at San Marco



Madonna by *Fra Filippo Lippi*



# HISTORY FOR THE THOUGHTFUL CHILD

History is about people. So it is important to begin the study of any historical period with a background in biography. As much as certain modern scholars like to crow about the debunking of the "great man" theory of history, it remains true that certain men (and their ideas) have had more impact and far-reaching influence than others. One needs to understand the important people in order to understand the times. And then one must achieve a deeper understanding of the times in order to understand the important people.

The biographies in this volume show the continuity between the Renaissance and the Reformation. The revival of learning which characterized the Renaissance led directly to the recovery of the tools and texts that the Reformers used to place the Bible in the language (and hands) of the people. It is an old saw, but true, that "Erasmus laid the egg that Luther hatched."

This book will give readers a sense of the events that helped to shape the modern world, the modern political state, and the church. You will meet men and women of tremendous ability and often unbelievable courage who were at work in the events of the Renaissance and Reformation. We should admire them for their virtues and seek to imitate them, and take caution from their flaws and failures and seek to avoid them. That, after all, is the point of studying history.

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Rob & Cyndy with the Greenleaf Guinea Pigs!



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ISBN 9781882514106



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