

History 642: Humanism and the Renaissance

George Mason University, Fall 2011
Monday evenings 7:20-10:00 p.m. in David King Hall 2054

Instructor: Dr. Mack P. Holt
Office: Robinson Hall B 226
Office hours: Mondays 4:00-6:00 p.m. by appointment
Telephone: (703)-993-1250
Fax: (703)-993-1251
Email: mholt@gmu.edu

Goals of the course:

1. To introduce students to the most recent research on the European Renaissance of the fourteenth, fifteenth, and early sixteenth centuries and to help them understand the major issues and debates among contemporary historians.
2. To help students understand that historical reconstructions of the past—which is what we call History—are not necessarily the same thing as everything that happened in the past. History, which has to be constructed and put in a narrative form, is thus an interpretation of the past.
3. To help students also understand that historical truth is neither absolute nor arbitrary. That is, although there is no single fixed historical truth, all historical interpretations are not equally valid.

Required readings (available in GMU Bookstore):

Charles Nauert, *Humanism and the Culture of Renaissance Europe*
Craig Kallendorf, ed., *Humanist Educational Treatises*
Niccolò Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*
Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting*
Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists*
Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy*
Baldasar Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*
Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*
Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Discourses on Livy*
Jacob Burckhardt, *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*
Johan Huizinga, *The Autumn of the Middle Ages*
Paul Grendler, *Schooling in Renaissance Italy*
Anthony Grafton, *Leon Battista Alberti*
Edward Muir, *Mad Blood Stirring*
Anthony Grafton, *Giordano's Cosmos*
Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin, *The Coming of the Book*
Andrew Pettegree, *The Book in the Renaissance*

Schedule of assignments:

Week 1 (Aug.29): Introduction

Reading: Charles Nauert, *Humanism and the Culture of Renaissance Europe*
Questions: What is humanism? What was its impact? And how did it evolve as it spread outside Italy?

Monday, September 5: Labor Day Holiday, No Class

Week 2 (Sept. 12): Primary Sources: Humanism and Education

Reading: Craig Kallendorf, ed., *Humanist Educational Treatises*
Questions: What made up the humanist curriculum and how was it different from the medieval curriculum? What impact did it have on Renaissance education? Who made up the students of humanist learning? What did this curriculum prepare students to do?

Week 3 (Sept. 19): Primary Sources: Humanism and the Writing of History

Reading: Niccolò Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*
Questions: In what specific ways was Machiavelli's history of Florence a humanist history, and how was this different from earlier histories? How would you describe his historical method? And what was his main argument (or arguments) in this history?

Week 4 (Sept. 26): Primary Sources: Humanism and Renaissance Art

Reading: Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting*; Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists* (read the introduction and prefaces to parts 1-3, and the biographies of Giotto, Ghiberti, Massacio, Brunelleschi, Fra Angelico, Alberti, Lippi, Botticelli, Da Vinci, Raphael, and Michelangelo); and Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy*
Questions: How was Renaissance art different from medieval art, technically, stylistically, and in terms of subject matter? Who started this new style and who were its major innovators? What was the link between humanism and the new Renaissance style in art? And what is "the period eye"?

Week 5 (Oct. 3): Primary Sources: Class, Gender, and Manners

Reading: Baldasar Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*
Questions: What were considered the traits of the ideal courtier (i.e., gentleman)? What kinds of manners (in speech, dress, comportment, etc.) were necessary to distinguish the courtier from his social inferiors? What was Castiglione's view of female courtiers, and what roles were they supposed to play at court?

Week 6 (Oct. 11): Primary Sources: Humanism, Politics, and the State

Note: Class meets on Tuesday this week only.

Reading: Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince* and *The Discourses on Livy* (Book 1, ch.1-60; Book 2, ch. 1-15; Book 3, ch. 1-9, 24-35, and 40-49); Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Legibus* (On the Laws), Book III only (available on-line at http://files.libertyfund.org/files/545/0044-02_Bk.pdf , pp. 131-171).

Questions: Despite their obvious differences, what are the principal common themes stressed in both *The Prince* and *The Discourses*? How do both Machiavelli and Cicero support the notion that the welfare of the people is the highest law (*Salus populi suprema lex esto*)? How does this then lead both of them to a defense of republicanism?

Week 7 (Oct. 17): Historiography: Jacob Burckhardt

Reading: Jacob Burckhardt, *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*

Questions: How did Burckhardt construct a new paradigm of the Renaissance as the beginning of the modern world? What does he mean by the “state as a work of art”? What were his views on the religion and morals of Renaissance Italy? In what ways can this book be seen as a product of nineteenth-century liberalism and nationalism?

Week 8 (Oct. 24): Historiography: Johan Huizinga

Reading: Johan Huizinga, *The Autumn of the Middle Ages*

Questions: In what ways does Huizinga’s study of the northern Renaissance court of Burgundy run counter to Burckhardt’s interpretation? In what ways does he support Burckhardt’s interpretation? And how is the northern Renaissance depicted differently from the Renaissance in Italy?

Week 9 (Oct. 31): Historiography: Renaissance Schools

Reading: Paul Grendler, *Schooling in Renaissance Italy*; and Robert Black, “Italian Renaissance Education,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 52 (1991): 315-34; and Grendler’s reply to Black in the same issue, pp. 335-37 (both available via JSTOR)

Questions: What were the principal novelties as well as continuities between late medieval and Renaissance schools? What kinds of new schools emerged in the Renaissance? Who attended them? And what did they study?

Week 10 (Nov. 7): Historiography: A Renaissance Man?

Reading: Anthony Grafton, *Leon Battista Alberti*; and re-read what Burckhardt had to say about Alberti

Questions: How does Grafton’s portrayal of Alberti differ from Burckhardt’s? Of all his many areas of expertise, in which of them did he truly excel? How did Alberti promote himself through his writings? And how successful do you think this self-promotion was?

Week 11 (Nov. 14): Historiography: The Civilizing Process?

Reading: Edward Muir, *Mad Blood Stirring*; and “Stuart Carroll, “The Peace in the Feud in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century France,” *Past & Present* 178 (2003): 74-115 (available via JSTOR)

Questions: What is Muir’s principal argument about the decline of feuding in Renaissance Italy? What role did the feud play in Renaissance society? How did manner books like *The Book of the Courtier* affect the feud? Does the evidence presented by Carroll support or undermine Muir’s conclusions?

Week 12 (Nov. 21): Historiography: Renaissance Astrology

Reading: Anthony Grafton, *Giardano's Cosmos*

Questions: In what specific ways was Renaissance astrology consistent with the principles of Renaissance humanism? In what ways was it also consistent with Christian religion in the period? Despite the fact that the Church consistently denounced astrology as a hoax and contrary to ecclesiastical law, why do you think so many Europeans were believers in it, including some of the most powerful intellects of the period?

Week 13 (Nov. 28): Historiography: Printing and the Book 1

Reading: L.Febvre and H.-J. Martin, *The Coming of the Book*

Questions: In what specific ways did the advent of printing in the mid-fifteenth century transform the book and the world of learning? What were the printed book's greatest strengths? Its greatest weaknesses?

Week 14 (Dec. 5): Historiography: Printing and the Book 2

Reading: Andrew Pettegree, *The Book in the Renaissance*

Questions: How does Pettegree's book differ in approach and methodology from that of Febvre and Martin? Do these differences result in any different conclusions from Febvre and Martin? And which book, in your opinion, is the better and more useful introduction to the book in the Renaissance period and why?

Monday, Dec. 12: Take-home final exam due

Oral participation is important in a graduate seminar, and every member of the class is expected to participate. At the same time, volubility is no substitute for thoughtfulness. With the exception of the first class meeting, you will write a short review of the required reading each week, a hard copy of which will be due in class on the date the reading is to be discussed. Your review (2-3 pp. typed and double-spaced) should focus on the questions listed on the syllabus for each week. In addition there will be a take-home final exam at the end of the course, to be distributed on December 5 and due on December 12 (there will be no formal class on this date). Each class will begin with one or two students making short oral presentations of ca. 20-25 mins. each, summarizing the reading and addressing the leading questions for discussion. In theory, you will be able to choose which week—each of you will have to make a short oral presentation once over the course of the semester—so be prepared to make these choices on the first night of class. In fact, please come with a first, second, and third choice. Your oral presentation will be factored into the oral participation part of your final grade.

The final grade will be based on the following formula:

Book reviews	40%
Oral participation	40%
Final exam	20%