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## Cultural Commentary: Renaissance News

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## Cultural Commentary

### Renaissance News

by Barbara Apstein

One of the best-known periods in history, the Renaissance ended more than 400 years ago, but the ideas and works of art it produced are all around us. The images of the Mona Lisa, Michelangelo's David and Raphael's child-angels are, ironically, more familiar to modern Americans than they could have been to fifteenth-century Italians. In magazines and on billboards, we find pictures like that of the Mona Lisa, equipped with headphones, advertising Audio Books, while Leonardo's "Madonna and Saint Anne" sells "classic" Bertolli olive oil. Botticelli's Venus beckons the prospective buyer to Adobe Illustrator software and, in another ad, models eyeglasses. These and other Renaissance reproductions are familiar from book jackets, greeting cards, t-shirts and refrigerator magnets.

Like the images they created, the names of the great Renaissance artists have also become familiar through commercial exploitation. Michelangelo and Donatello, reincarnated as mutant Ninja turtles, became household names a few years ago; more recently, Bruegger's Bagel store wittily introduced a Leonardo da Veggie sandwich.

Even the word Renaissance has become ubiquitous, having displaced the more prosaic "revival." In an informal survey conducted over the past few weeks, the following examples (among others) surfaced: the American novelist Edith Wharton is currently undergoing a Renaissance, as are Boston's Chinatown and New Jersey's Atlantic City.

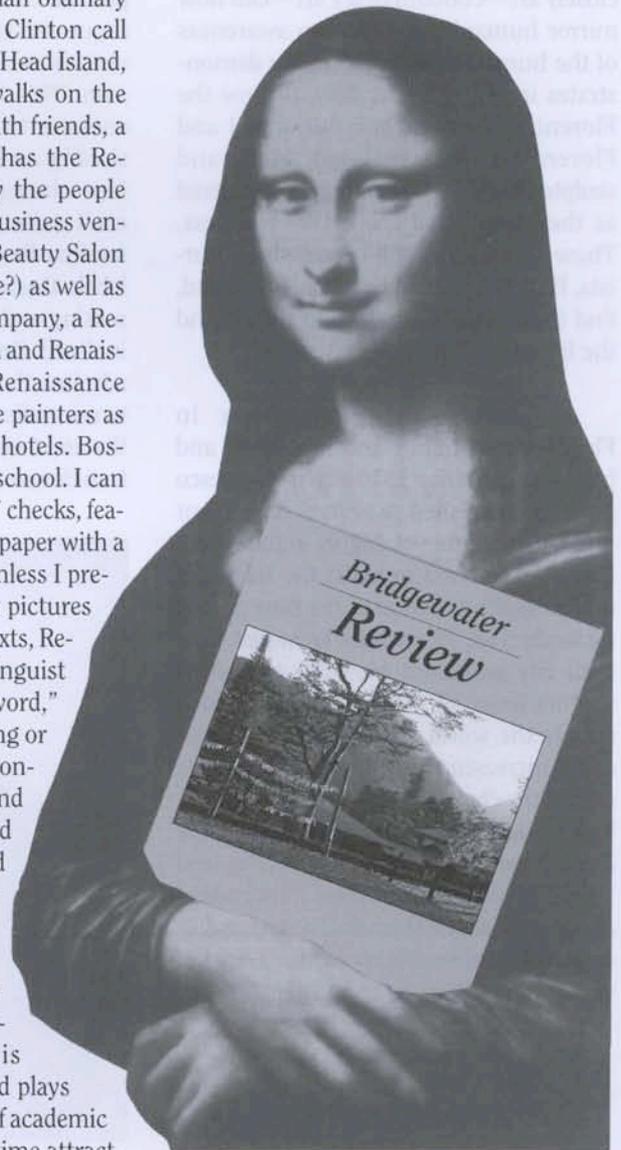
People who write about the future seem to adore the word renaissance. Computers, they predict, will spark a renaissance in education, making learning "fun," and e-mail will lead to a renaissance in letter-writing. The author of a new book expressing a positive economic outlook rejected a no-nonsense title like *The Future Looks Good*; instead he called it *The Coming American Renaissance*.

Such is the aura of the word Renaissance, that, in the worlds of politics and advertising, it can be divorced from its literal meaning, rebirth. A new ice cream flavor, "Dark chocolate almond Renaissance" was recently added to the Stop and Shop Supermarket's freezer case, costing, not surprisingly, 75 cents more than ordinary chocolate. President and Mrs. Clinton call their annual vacation at Hilton Head Island, with activities that include walks on the beach and strategy sessions with friends, a "Renaissance weekend." Nor has the Renaissance been overlooked by the people who think up names for new business ventures. There is a Renaissance Beauty Salon (on Newbury Street, where else?) as well as a Renaissance Computing Company, a Renaissance Property Corporation and Renaissance Studios. There are Renaissance cruises and Renaissance house painters as well as a chain of Renaissance hotels. Boston has a Renaissance charter school. I can pay my bills with "Renaissance" checks, featuring "the artistry of marbled paper with a delicate gold foil accent," — unless I prefer wild ducks, lighthouses, or pictures of the Simpsons. In these contexts, Renaissance has become what linguist S. I. Hayakawa called a "purr-word," the human equivalent of purring or wagging one's tail. With its connotations of elegance, culture and aristocratic refinement, the word Renaissance can sound good without actually meaning anything.

By far the most popular Renaissance writer in the English-speaking world is Shakespeare, whose poems and plays continue to sustain hundreds of academic researchers while at the same time attract-

ing popular audiences. On stage and screen, new Shakespearean productions are always in the the works. Film versions generally dispense with most of the Elizabethan dialogue to make room for mood-enhancing music and special camera effects, such as close-ups of galloping horses, and luxurious backgrounds. Kenneth Branagh's recent film version of *Hamlet* however, retains the full original text and the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences paid homage to Shakespeare's genius as well as to his continuing box-office success by awarding *Hamlet* an Oscar nomination for "best screenplay."

So powerful is the conviction that Shakespeare's work is truly universal, that



he speaks to the contemporary world, that his plays have a role in one of Hollywood's most durable inspirational narratives, the one about the great teacher who changes students' lives (think of Robin Williams in *Dead Poets' Society* or Michelle Pfeiffer in *Dangerous Minds*). The transformative power of studying Shakespeare is one of the premises of the recent film *Renaissance Man*, starring Danny DeVito. The DeVito character is assigned to teach a group of army recruits who are in danger of failing basic training. The recruits, known as the "double d's" (for "dumb as dogshit"), are initially surly and hostile, as is traditional in this genre. Upon being introduced to *Hamlet*, however, they quickly realize that "Shakespeare is cool." Tossing away their comic books and *Sports Illustrated*, they discover the intellectual pleasures of discussing Claudius and Gertrude, ultimately even composing and performing a lively "Hamlet rap." By the end of the film, the recruits are spending their day off going to a performance of *Henry V* and tossing out quotations from Shakespeare's plays. Needless to say, they pass basic training with flying colors.

The use of the word Renaissance to refer to a specific historical period has a curious history. The sixteenth-century art critic Giorgio Vasari employed the Italian word "rinascità" in his *Lives of the Artists* to denote the revival of classical antiquity in the works of such painters as Botticelli, Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo. Vasari's meaning, the revival of classical antiquity, is clearly no longer the primary meaning of the word as it is generally understood. It was a Swiss historian, Jacob Burckhardt, who, three centuries later, described the "Renaissance" in the terms which have become most familiar to modern readers in his book *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*.

For Burckhardt, the important feature of the Renaissance was not the revival of classical antiquity but the development of the individual. Medieval people, in Burckhardt's view, identified themselves only as members of a group — a race, a

people, a family or a guild. In contrast, Burckhardt found the essence of the Renaissance in the spirit of individualism common to all aspects of its culture, a quality reflected in life, thought, religion and art. *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* helped define the historical periods in ways which are familiar to modern students: the Middle Ages was a time of intellectual stagnation; the Renaissance, a period of rebirth.

Despite its influence, many historians have criticized Burckhardt's theory as oversimplified. They argue that his vision of a single "spirit of the age," implying that all aspects of a culture are interconnected, led him to emphasize those aspects of the culture that "fit" the predetermined "spirit" and ignore others. Thus, some historians

countries of western Europe over a period of several hundred years. It is usually defined as beginning in Italy in the late fourteenth century but not reaching England until the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Thus if the poet Chaucer, who died in 1400, had been Italian, he would be classified as a Renaissance writer, but since he was English, he is labelled a medieval writer. And when did the Renaissance officially end? Some scholars argue that it includes the Reformation, others that it continues into the Baroque period.

However inaccurate the word may be in a historical sense, the idea of the Renaissance as Burckhardt defined it has clearly taken hold. The Renaissance celebration of individualism speaks powerfully to contemporary men and women, as does the tantalizing possibility of re-making one's identity. In his book *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, scholar Stephen Greenblatt characterized the period as one of "increased self-consciousness about the fashioning of human identity as a manipulable, artful process," citing, among many examples, Renaissance instructional manuals like *The Book of the Courtier*.

This description fits our own time equally well, although Renaissance men and women could never have imagined some of the forms that self-fashioning has taken at the end of the twentieth century. Today's "makeovers"

tend to emphasize the body rather than the spirit: plastic surgery (including hair replacements, tummy tucks, and liposuction) lures consumers with the promise of restoring youth and beauty, and instructional videos offer viewers a revitalized sex life. Yet Americans also have a deep faith in the human potential for intellectual, emotional and moral growth, and the possibility of "re-inventing ourselves." Because it has become identified with a cultural idea which is highly valued at the present time — the individual's capacity for self-fashioning and self-renewal — the word Renaissance continues to evoke a powerful positive response.



Shakespeare welcomes motorists to a local gas station.

argue, Burckhardt exaggerated the sharp break between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. The Renaissance was not, in fact, a total break with the past, nor was the Middle Ages a time of unmitigated darkness and superstition. Interest in learning and study of the classics continued throughout the medieval period; there were medieval individualists and, despite the domination of the Church, men and women with strong secular interests.

Adding to the problematic nature of Burckhardt's concept of the Renaissance is the fact that the term refers to events and movements occurring in all the major