

THE ITALIAN RENAISSANCE

BY LYNN METZGER



Renaissance cathedral Santa Maria del Fiore in Florence, Italy

Starting in Tuscany in the late 13th century, the Renaissance (from the French word for “rebirth”) was a cultural explosion that spurred Italy’s progression from the Dark Ages to the modern era. While the exact roots of the Renaissance are still hotly debated, many scholars agree that it started when Florence began to serve as a major junction for goods from northern Europe, while Venice, Genoa, and Pisa established trade routes with the Middle East. Meanwhile, the Black Death decimated the population, weakening medieval society’s rigid hierarchical structure and promoting greater social mobility. Newly wealthy merchants, financiers, and craftsmen increasingly dominated local politics and government and spent their riches on art, scientific innovations, and higher education, bankrolling some of the world’s greatest masterpieces. The Renaissance also marked a philosophical return from the superstitions of the Middle Ages to ancient Roman beliefs in reason, ethics, justice, and the essential worth of humankind.

Peaking in the mid-1500s, the Italian Renaissance eventually yielded to the foreign invasions that demolished the comparative political stability of the era and plunged the region into the bloody Italian Wars. Endangered Italian artists and intellectuals fled to France and regions north, where they passed on their techniques and skills. Italy’s aggressors, too, carried the ideas and achievements of the Renaissance home to their native countries. Consequently, the principles of the Italian Renaissance survived and spread throughout

Europe. Though each region eventually experienced its own Renaissance and contributed to the modern era, the seeds of the Western world as we know it—in medicine, science, art, architecture, music, and literature—were originally planted in Italy.

OVERVIEW

The Italian Renaissance (1963)

By J. H. Plumb



Encompassing topics as diverse as politics, war, religion, culture, art, education, and the role of women, the first half of this classic, highly readable overview of the Italian Renaissance, penned by late British historian and Cambridge University Professor John H. Plumb, fleshes out the era’s principle events, personalities, and ideas. The second half, a collaborative effort by some of the 20th century’s leading scholars, is divided into minibiographies of the era’s movers and shakers, including those of Leonardo da Vinci, Lorenzo de’ Medici, Machiavelli, Michelangelo, and Petrarch. Although our understanding of the Italian Renaissance has changed over the last half century, this breezy, entertaining account continues to stand out as one of the best.

GENERAL NONFICTION

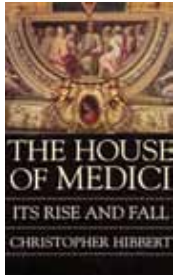
THE BORGIIAS AND THE MEDICI

Two legendary families rose to power during the Italian Renaissance: the Borgias held sway through the Roman Catholic Church, and the Medici built an international banking empire. Tales of corruption, torture, murder, incest, and revenge within these families have established their place in the popular imagination, inspiring works by Alexandre Dumas, Honoré de Balzac, and Mario Puzo, as well as plays, operas, movies, and television series. While historians currently question some of the most infamous rumors attached to these families, the facts they've been able to document are shocking enough.

The House of Medici

Its Rise and Fall (1975)

By Christopher Hibbert



Inextricably tied to the history of Florence, this illustrious family produced two popes and two queens of France while commissioning some of history's greatest art from the Renaissance's most brilliant artists. Highlighting their political maneuverings, Oxford-educated historian Christopher Hibbert tells the story of the Medici family, from their humble beginnings as merchants to their remarkable rise to the aristocracy in the 15th century, their iron-fisted rule over Renaissance Florence, and their dismal decline 300 years later. Because of the book's tight focus and its lack of background detail, some knowledge of the Renaissance or the history of Florence would be helpful to readers.

The Cardinal's Hat

Money, Ambition, and Everyday Life in the Court of a Borgia Prince (2005)

By Mary Hollingsworth

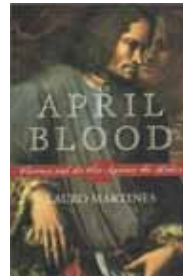


Despite his lack of a vocation for the priesthood, Ippolito D'Este, the second son of Lucrezia Borgia and the Duke of Ferrara, was destined by tradition for service in the Church. On the basis of a voluminous cache of firsthand correspondence and documents, Mary Hollingsworth charts his rise through the hierarchy of the Church, from his appointment to the archbishopric of Milan at the age of 10 to his eventual promotion to Cardinal at the age of 29—26 years before he was even ordained as a priest. Hollingsworth also chronicles the affairs of his household, including his travels, political machinations, affairs with women, hobbies, and prolific spending on luxury and vice. A fascinating exposé of daily life among the wealthy.

April Blood

Florence and the Plot against the Medici (2003)

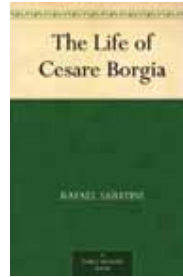
By Lauro Martines



On Easter Sunday in 1478, assassins attacked Lorenzo de' Medici and his brother Giuliano, de facto rulers of the Florentine Republic, as they attended mass. Lorenzo escaped, but Giuliano died on the church floor. Untangling twisted threads of obsession, ambition, betrayal, and revenge, Lauro Martines, Professor of European History at the University of California, Los Angeles, details the events leading up to the brutal attack—which was masterminded by the patrician Pazzi family, the King of Naples, the Duke of Urbino, and Pope Sixtus IV—and Lorenzo's swift and brutal retribution. All the events take place against the glittering backdrop of Renaissance Florence.

The Life of Cesare Borgia (1912)

By Rafael Sabatini

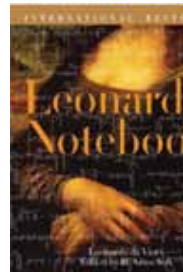


Italian-English novelist Rafael Sabatini delves into the life of Cesare Borgia, the son of Pope Alexander VI, and his infamous family while immersing readers in the power struggles and intrigues of Renaissance Italy. Sabatini's tone is unabashedly revisionist. Drawing on extensive firsthand research, he confirms and justifies, on the basis of contemporary beliefs and morals, some of history's most scandalous accounts while completely dismissing other stories (and the historians who embrace them) as outright fabrications. *The Life of Cesare Borgia* may not be as titillating as the Showtime series, but it remains one of the most thoroughly researched, concise, and accurate portraits of the notorious family to date.

THE ARTS AND SCIENCES

Leonardo's Notebooks (2005)

By Leonardo da Vinci, edited by H. Anna Suh



Amassed from more than 7,000 pages of notes and drawings, these annotated notebooks of the peerless artist and inventor highlight his interest in a wide range of subjects, from carefully sketched studies of the natural world to human anatomy, geology, astronomy, and engineering. Former Metropolitan Museum of Art curator H. Anna Suh has selected Leon-

ardo's most profound and insightful writings, and this 336-page collection shines with his acuity and genius.

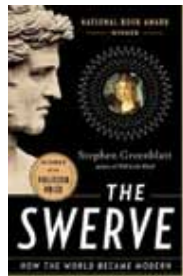
The Swerve

How the World Became Modern (2011)

By Stephen Greenblatt

◆ PULITZER PRIZE

◆ NATIONAL BOOK AWARD



Harvard University Professor Stephen Greenblatt describes a pivotal moment in 1417 when papal emissary and avid book collector Poggio Bracciolini stumbled across a dusty manuscript hidden in a German monastery—the last surviving copy of *On the Nature of Things* by the Roman poet and philosopher Lucretius.

The text repudiates the gods, religion, and superstition and argues that the universe was formed by tiny particles constantly in motion, whirling and colliding according to simple natural laws. These unprecedented and dangerous ideas later inspired artists, philosophers, and scientists, and, according to Greenblatt, were instrumental in fueling the cultural upheaval of the Renaissance.

Michelangelo and the Pope's Ceiling

(2003)

By Ross King



Early 16th-century Rome was a city ruled by greed and corruption rather than scripture. When its reigning monarch, Pope Julius II, decided that celebrated sculptor Michelangelo Buonarroti (who had little experience as a painter) should paint the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, Michelangelo had little choice in the matter—and absolutely no room for

failure. In this riveting account, nominated for the National Book Critics Circle Award, Canadian writer Ross King chronicles the four years that Michelangelo spent working on the famous frescoes, which, despite technical difficulties, internal squabbling, and health and money problems, became one of the greatest artistic masterpieces of the world. Also see King's fascinating description of scruffy and bad-tempered Filippo Brunelleschi's transformation of Renaissance architecture, *Brunelleschi's Dome: How a Renaissance Genius Reinvented Architecture* (2000).

Creation of Man, Sistine Chapel



The Lives of the Artists (1550)

By Giorgio Vasari



Sixteenth-century Italian painter Giorgio Vasari compiled this catalog of biographies of the greatest artists of his day, and it has become widely recognized as the most important contemporary source of information on the artistic achievements of the Italian Renaissance. Although Vasari is primarily concerned with the artists' creative development

and works, he doesn't hesitate to add engrossing, sometimes eye-popping, descriptions of their personal lives. Dedicated in 1550 to Grand Duke Cosimo I de' Medici, Vasari's *Lives* includes mesmerizing accounts of Botticelli, Brunelleschi, Leonardo da Vinci, Donatello, Ghiberti, Michelangelo, and Raphael—among many, many others.

LITERARY FICTION

The Birth of Venus (2004)

By Sarah Dunant



When her father, a prosperous Florentine merchant, returns home from northern Europe with a young painter to decorate the family chapel, spirited 14-year-old Alessandra Cecchi finds herself enraptured by both the boy and his craft. Growing social unrest and an arranged marriage to a much older man, however, threaten to prevent

her from fulfilling her dreams. To date, Sarah Dunant has penned two other novels featuring women in Renaissance Italy: a courtesan in Venice (*In the Company of the Courtesan* [★★★★ **SELECTION** May/June 2006]) and a nun in Ferraro (*Sacred Hearts* [★★★★ **SELECTION** Sept/Oct 2009]). All three are compelling, multilayered portraits that bring the period and its inhabitants brilliantly to life. (★★★★ May/June 2004)

I, Mona Lisa (2006)

By Jeanne Kalogridis

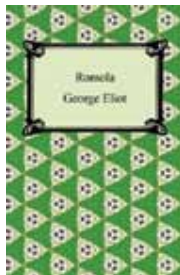


In 1478 Florence, Giuliano Medici is murdered by conspirators. His death presages Savonarola's reign of terror and the Medici family's ultimate decline. Against this backdrop, Lisa di Antonio Gherardini, the daughter of a woman who once caught the eye of Giuliano as well as Leonardo da Vinci and whose husband is later also murdered, comes of age. She marries Giuliano's nephew for love, and his

father commissions a portrait from Leonardo. But violence, treachery, and conspiracy soon threaten the young couple's passion and endanger their very lives.

Romola (1863)

By George Eliot



Although frequently outshined by Eliot's later work, *Romola* was hailed as a masterpiece when it was published in the 19th century and was reportedly Eliot's personal favorite. In 15th-century Florence, the sheltered daughter of a blind scholar, Romola, falls in love with Tito Melema, a charismatic newcomer to the city with little means, big ambitions,

and a dangerous secret. After they marry, Tito spends his time climbing the social ladder while Romola is swept up in the religious uproar caused by Dominican friar Girolamo Savonarola. The historical novel is a profound, vibrant, and sweeping tour de force that will not only challenge but also amply reward readers.

I, Iago (2012)

By Nicole Galland



Scholars and fans of Shakespeare's tragedy *Othello* have always been puzzled by Iago, one of the Bard's darkest and most mysterious creations. What secrets in his past led him to commit such heinous crimes? Starting with his troubled childhood in 16th-century Venice, screenwriter Nicole Galland maps out the joys and disappointments of Iago

Sorzano's life—his military career, his courtship of and marriage to the lovely Emilia, and his close friendship with the Moorish general, Othello—and the events that drove him to treachery and murder. As she reveals the man behind the Shakespearean villain, Galland elaborates on the play's characters and events and crafts a compelling portrait of evil in the making.

The Floating Book (2004)

A Novel of Venice

By Michelle Lovric

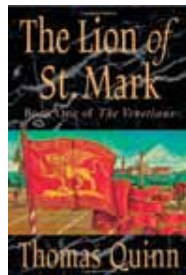
In 1468, German brothers Wendelin and Johann von Speyer arrive in Venice with the city's very first printing press, and with the help of their young editor, they launch a lucrative business printing ancient Roman and early Christian works. But when Wendelin decides to publish the erotic poetry of Catullus, he scandalizes polite society, affronts the Church, and sets in motion events that will change all of their lives. The true star of this novel is 15th-century Venice, a "transparent floating book, where the pages are

concepts visible in colour. Not a thing of the mind, but a piece of beauty dedicated to the senses alone.”

The Lion of St. Mark

The Venetians, Book 1 (2005)

By Thomas Quinn



Two Venetian noblemen, Giovanni Soranzo and Antonio Ziani, are sworn enemies as a result of a bitter, longstanding family dispute. When the invading forces of the Ottoman Turks threaten *La Serenissima*, the Serene Republic of Venice, they must try to set aside their differences and work together to defend their home. This page-turning epic,

filled with adventure and intrigue, is Quinn's debut novel and the first title in a planned trilogy featuring the Soranzo and Ziani families. The story of Giovanni and Antonio is continued in *The Sword of Venice* (2007). The third title has not yet been released.

The Agony and the Ecstasy

A Biographical Novel of Michelangelo (1961)

By Irving Stone



Based on Michelangelo Buonarroti's correspondence and other firsthand sources, this classic biographical novel details the exalted artist's life, his loves, and his soul-searing, obsessive passion to create. Despite rivalries with Leonardo da Vinci and Raphael and clashes with patrons, Michelangelo produced some of the world's most memorable and moving art,

including the statue of David, the Pietà, and the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. With opulent prose and gorgeous scene-setting, Stone breathes life into the indomitable sculptor, painter, and architect, allowing readers to enter the mind of a genius and giving Michelangelo a voice—as fascinating as it is haunting—across the ages.

FURTHER READING

THE SECRET BOOK OF GRAZIA DEI ROSSI (1997) | JACQUELINE PARK

LEONARDO'S SWANS (2006) | KAREN ESSEX

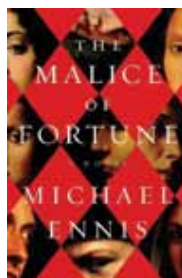
THE ENCHANTRESS OF FLORENCE (★★★★ Sept/Oct 2008) | SALMAN RUSHDIE

THE PASSION OF ARTEMISIA (2002) | SUSAN VREELAND

THRILLERS / MYSTERIES

The Malice of Fortune (2012)

By Michael Ennis



Pope Alexander VI, still mourning the death of his favorite son, Juan Borgia, Duke of Gandia, whose body was dragged from the Tiber River five years before, dispatches Juan's former lover, the courtesan Madonna Damiata, to the city of Imola to uncover the truth behind Juan's murder. Upon arriving, however, Damiata finds a long list of suspects

and, worse yet, a brutal killer targeting women. As tensions mount, Damiata enlists the help of Niccolò Machiavelli, a minor Florentine diplomat with a keen insight into human nature, and Leonardo da Vinci, a cunning and resourceful military engineer employed by Cesare Borgia, Juan's younger brother, to help her solve the mystery.

The Second Duchess (2011)

By Elizabeth Loupas



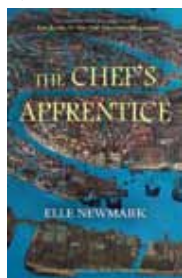
When Barbara of Austria, the clever but plain daughter of the Holy Roman Emperor, accepts the proposal of the powerful Alfonso d'Este, Duke of Ferrara, she already knows that his first wife died under mysterious circumstances.

However, marriage is her only alternative to life in a convent, so she enthusiastically embraces her new duties. But

court rumors pique her curiosity, and doubts threaten to shatter her newfound freedom and happiness. When she starts to ask unwelcome questions, she discovers that she must unravel the mystery of the first Duchess's death—or risk following in her footsteps. Inspired by Robert Browning's poem, "My Last Duchess," this dazzling debut novel is steeped in fascinating period detail.

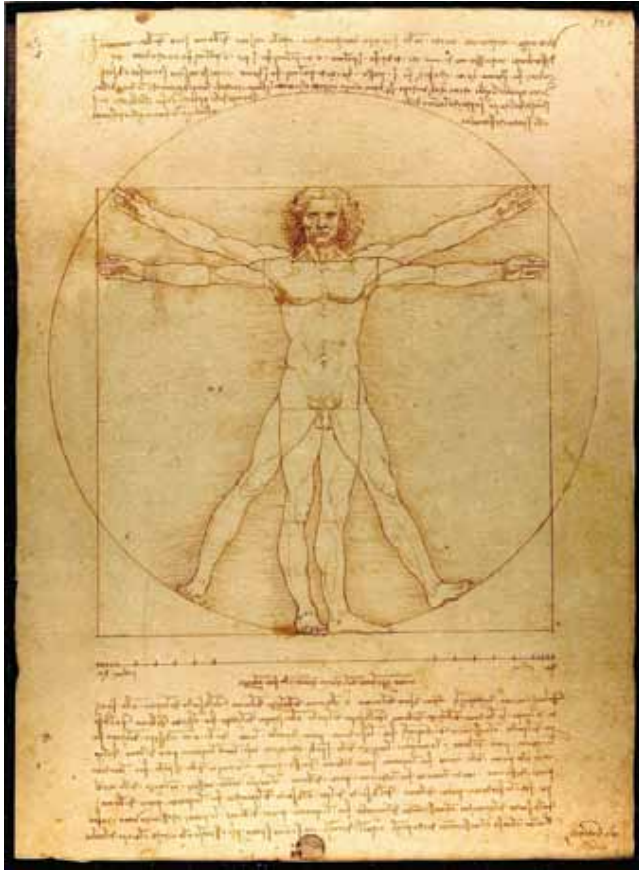
The Chef's Apprentice (2011)

By Elle Newmark



Caught in the act of pilfering a pomegranate from a street vendor, 14-year-old Luciano, a homeless street urchin, is unaccountably taken in by the head chef of the Doge of Venice. While training as the chef's assistant, Luciano hears rumors at court of a mysterious, magical book said to contain the secret to achieving happiness, wealth, and eternal life. Hoping for

a love spell to seduce a charming young novice at a nearby convent, he uses his new position to move among the courtiers and search for the book. But he soon finds himself



Vitruvian Man by Leonardo da Vinci

trapped between those who covet the book and those who will protect it at any cost.

The Queen's Gambit

A Leonardo da Vinci Mystery (2008)

By Diane A. S. Stuckart

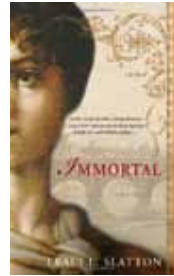


The original Renaissance man turns to solving crimes in this first installment of Diane Stuckart's Leonardo da Vinci series. Ludovico Sforza, the Duke of Milan, asks his young court engineer, Leonardo, to arrange a living chess game to entertain his court. The game takes a turn for the worse when the Duke's cousin and ambassador to France, the man playing the white bishop, goes missing and is found stabbed to death with the Duke's knife. In the midst of court conspiracies and vicious political intrigue, the Duke orders Leonardo to investigate the crime. See also *Portrait of a Lady* (2009) and *A Bolt from the Blue* (2010).

FANTASY / SCI-FI / ALTERNATIVE HISTORY

Immortal (2008)

By Traci L. Slatton



Two hundred-year-old Luca Bastardo (Luca the Bastard) records the story of his life as he awaits the Inquisitors' sentence in his cell. As a young boy, Luca seemingly awoke fully formed on the streets of Florence, homeless, alone, and without any knowledge of himself or his origins. Between the hunger and merciless abuse of his childhood and the glittering world of art and culture he enters as an adult, Luca finds that he isn't growing any older; this peculiar agelessness drives him to study alchemy and medicine in an attempt to uncover the secret of his identity. Others, however, have also noticed Luca's aberrant trait—and they will stop at nothing to solve the riddle for themselves.

The Spirit Ring (1992)

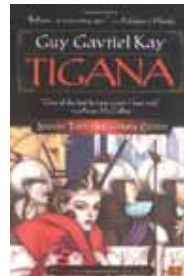
By Lois McMaster Bujold



When Uberto Ferrante assassinates the Duke of Montefoglia during an uprising, the Duke's chief sorcerer, Prospero Beneforte, flees with his 16-year-old daughter Fiametta. Ruthlessly pursued by Ferrante's men, Beneforte dies protecting Fiametta, and while she escapes, his body is transported back to the palazzo to be used in a dark ritual. Fiametta, determined to save her father's soul, joins forces with a Swiss miner, Thur Ochs, whose brother was also killed and spiritually enslaved during the coup. In this novel by a Hugo and Nebula Award-winning author, they must then face off against Ferrante and a wicked master magician.

Tigana (1990)

By Guy Gavriel Kay



Nominated for a World Fantasy Award and an Aurora Award, *Tigana* is a mesmerizing tale set on the Peninsula of Palm, a fictional land divided into provinces like Renaissance Italy—a land uneasily presided over by two powerful sorcerers, Brandin of Ygrath and Alberico of Barbador. When Brandin's son is killed while attempting to subdue the people of Tigana, Brandin crushes the city-state and uses magic to remove its name and history from the minds of Palm's inhabitants. But some survivors still remember, and as they surreptitiously gather in the corners of the kingdom, they plot to overthrow the tyrants and liberate their world.

The Shadow of the Lion (2002)

By Mercedes Lackey, Eric Flint, and Dave Freer



Magic is a way of life in 16th-century Italy. In this world, Hypatia, a Pagan philosopher and mathematician in the Egypt of the Roman Empire, was not murdered; the Ancient Library of Alexandria was not burned; and the knowledge of magic and alchemy the library contained has benefited subsequent civilizations. Marco and Benito Valdosta, grandsons of the Duke of Ferrara, have gone into hiding, posing as street urchins in the neighboring city-state of Venice to escape their grandfather's enemies. But a greater menace than all the Duke's enemies combined is on its way to Venice. The fate of the city may rest on the young men's shoulders.

YOUNG ADULT

Midnight Magic (1999)

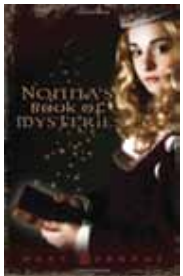
By Avi



Despite his renunciation of all things magical while he was on trial for witchcraft, Magus the Magician is summoned to the royal castle of Pergamontio to rid the royal family of a ghost that is terrifying young Princess Teresina. Magus doesn't even believe in ghosts, but the king has made it clear that the former magician will pay with his life if he fails to expel the sinister spirit. Hoping that logic and reason will trump superstition, Magus and his streetwise servant boy set out to solve the mystery. They soon, however, find themselves caught up in a conspiracy of murder, kidnapping, and deceit.

Nonna's Book of Mysteries (2010)

By Mary A. Osborne



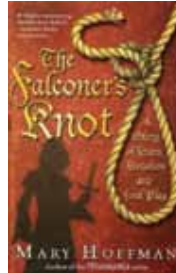
More than anything, 14-year-old Emilia Serafini wants to be a painter—an impossibility in 15th-century Florence, since the Masters will accept only boys as apprentices. Instead, her fate will be marriage to the richest man her father can find. To cheer her, Emilia's mother gives her a mysterious book that once belonged to her grandmother, and within the pages of *A Manual to the Science of Alchemy*, she begins to find solace. While the book is a treasured heirloom to Emilia and her mother, it is also a rare and valuable trophy to a collector. As it turns out, Emilia's new suitor, a wealthy

businessman from Genoa, may be more interested in the book than in her.

The Falconer's Knot

A Story of Friars, Flirtation and Foul Play (2007)

By Mary Hoffman



In 14th-century Umbria, Silvano, the teenage son of a nobleman, seeks sanctuary with the Franciscans after he is accused of murdering the husband of a peasant woman he once admired from afar. The victim was found stabbed to death with Silvano's dagger, leading the authorities to consider the case closed.

Maintaining his innocence, however, Silvano teams up with a beautiful young novice at the adjoining convent to clear his name. Mary Hoffman is also the author of an acclaimed series of fantasy novels, beginning with *Stravaganza: City of Masks* (2004) that are set both in modern-day London and an alternate Renaissance Italy.

Daughter of Venice (2002)

By Donna Jo Napoli



Fourteen-year-old Donata Mocenigo, a younger daughter in a noble Venetian family, dreams of getting an education, like her brothers, and of marrying, like her eldest sister, but she knows it is far more likely that she will be dispatched to a convent as soon as she comes of age. Longing to see the world before she is shut away forever, she disguises herself as a peasant boy and escapes the family palazzo for a few hours one day. Her success bolsters her courage, and she is soon venturing out and exploring the city every day. Her prank, however, could have serious and lasting consequences for her entire family. ■