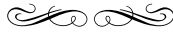


CHAPTER I

When & Where



We are too apt to treat of history in parcels, and to attempt to draw lessons from detached chapters in the biography of the human race. To observe the connection between the several stages of a progressive movement of the human spirit, and to recognize that the forces at work are still active, is the true philosophy of history.¹

In general, I would agree with this warning given more than a century ago by John Addington Symonds. Yet, perhaps his words have been taken too much to heart of late. In fact, the whole concept of historical periods has come under attack.² Not so very long ago, that there was a Renaissance period with its unique set of distinguishing cultural characteristics would not have been questioned. Now, however, many of the meanings traditionally associated with the word *Renaissance* have been subjected to re-appraisal. Age-old questions thought to have been explained and put to rest have been raised once again in an era of doubt: When was the Renaissance and where did it take place? Was there, in fact, a Renaissance at all? The age of the Renaissance has been described variously as either a great historical divide or as part of a rather seamless transition from the medieval to the modern, whatever those terms themselves might mean. The problems inherent in defining the nature of the Renaissance are receiving new attention as part of the general “periodization” controversy within the overall context of what has been called the “new art history.”

I cannot be oblivious to this challenge to traditional historical organization. It certainly is quite true that the use of historical periods and other

such sweeping classifications has limited our vision and has relegated certain artists and movements that did not seem to fit the period pattern to second-class status or even to virtual obscurity—witness the critical fate of such a splendid American sculptress as Anna Hyatt Huntington from the twentieth century and of Pisanello from the fifteenth. On the other hand, the recent effort to deperiodize might itself be interpreted as a part of the current period of diversity and political correctness: a manifestation of the taste of our time.

While I admit that the traditional practice of dividing history into periods does have its limitations, it also offers a chance to step back, gain perspective, and survey the past with a broader vision. To speak of an “age of discovery” or an “age of revolution” or to label a point in time as “art nouveau” or as the “Baroque” is more than a simple convenience. Each of these period-defining labels speaks to general characteristics by which we can comprehend the primary contributions of a time-bound cultural era. And so it is with the term *Renaissance*. Never mind that the philosophical underpinnings of the Renaissance did not reach into the lives of everyone living in Italy during the fifteenth century; they had enough impact to christen the age. Ultimately, whether or not we believe that there really was a discrete period in the flow of European culture that we can label “the Renaissance” is not as important as the fact that those living at the time believed in their special place in history. It may well be true that we will gain a broader vision if we see history as being seamless, but that is beside the real point.

At the same time that some would deny the overall concept of historical periods, other, even more “extreme” scholars are inclined to actually refute the very existence of the social and cultural changes associated with the term *Renaissance*. In fact, this latter group challenges the validity of any unique cultural contribution associated with the word. Almost two decades have gone by since William Hood attempted to sum up the current state of research in the field of Italian Renaissance art in one of those ambitious and valuable topical essays then being published in the *Art Bulletin*.³ “Over the past twenty years,” Hood wrote, “the Renaissance has gradually lost its ancient historiographical identity as a watershed between the Middle Ages and the modern world.” He went on to observe that “fewer writers than before seem eager to trace the antique sources of quattrocento and cinquecento art; more would embed it in the political and religious texture of contemporary life. Few write about the classical style at all.”

Hood’s comments in the *Art Bulletin* would seem to have addressed the lament raised more than forty years earlier by historian Lynn Thorndike in

the *Journal of the History of Ideas*.⁴ According to Thorndike, “the concept of the Italian Renaissance or Prenaissance has . . . done a great deal of harm in the past and may continue to do harm in the future. . . . It has kept men in general from recognizing that our life and thought is based more nearly and actually on the Middle Ages than on distant Greece and Rome, from whom our heritage is more indirect, bookish, sentimental, less institutional, social, religious, even less economic and experimental.”

Today, sixty years later, Thorndike might be pleased, for it has become a matter of fashionable scholarship not only to blur the distinctions between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance but also to play down the significance of a classical revival and even to disavow the fundamental presence of a distinctive Renaissance thought process.⁵ Recently, the argument has intensified, bolstered by a number of assaults upon traditional wisdom from art history’s sister disciplines of literature, history, and philosophy. Even within the ranks of art historians this has been the case. The late Howard Saalman, always a venturesome scholar, has found the oft-proclaimed father of the Renaissance style, Filippo Brunelleschi, to be decidedly wanting in classical revivalist tendencies. In Saalman’s view Brunelleschi was less the harbinger of revolutionary revival than he was a conservative chauvinist with “a personal style . . . deeply rooted in the traditional forms of Florence from the Baptistery to the Cathedral.”⁶ Yet, this is the same Brunelleschi, who, according to his contemporary, the Florentine banker Giovanni Rucellai, had rediscovered “the ancient building art of the Romans.”⁷

Some contend that antiquity, rather than being rediscovered in the Renaissance, was simply flotsam in the ever-flowing medieval current. This claim can be countered by pointing to writers of the period who recognized their age as being a time of rediscovery. Admittedly, although the concept of rebirth was a decided part of the quattrocento consciousness, the actual word *Renaissance*, or *rinascimento*, did not appear until the middle of the sixteenth century. We should not be surprised that the word, or its Italian root of *rinascita*, was first coined to define the artistic events of his age by the artist/art historian Giorgio Vasari back in 1550.⁸ It was not until 1855, however, that Jules Michelet picked up Vasari’s idea of the artistic rebirth and used the term *La Renaissance* as the title for a volume in his *Histoire de France*. Michelet thus extended the scope and context of the artistic experience recognized by Vasari to the broader cultural event that characterized a general European phenomenon typified by what he defined as “the discovery of the world and the discovery of man.”⁹ While it is true that Vasari used the word in a limited sense to explain the revo-

lution that had taken place in the art of his country, it is also true that the homogeneity of his age allows us to apply it to the entire reborn culture of the era. It would seem that this particular argument concerning whether or not there was a reawakening of antiquity is all a matter of personal interpretation and one's scholarly agenda.

Additional objections to the entire notion of the Renaissance as a meaningful concept also have been raised by those who believe that the use of such terminology is grounded in elitist assumptions and is therefore misleading at the very least. Those adhering to this position point out that the ideas we commonly associate with the term *Renaissance* affected only a relatively small part of the general population, the ones we might expect to have humanist inclinations: upper-class persons with wealth, position, and connections. Renaissance ideas, according to this interpretation of history, consequently would have made little impact upon the lives of a preponderance of a population consisting of simple craftsmen and laborers. Furthermore, since the Renaissance was an urban phenomenon, it also would have barely touched the workaday patterns of simple country folk. Accordingly, since the term would appear to be so restrictive in its application, it might be better, or so runs this line of thinking, to discard it in favor of a less descriptive phrase such as "early modern."

At first blush, this particular argument against retaining the term *Renaissance* would seem to have much in its favor. I would contend, however, that there is solid evidence to support a belief that the Renaissance spirit was in the air, increasingly pervasive in urban areas, and that it did reach out beyond city confines to impact the countryside.¹⁰ However, even if that had not been the case, the truth of the matter is that the course of cultural development is shaped most often in the urban centers. And it was, of course, in the cities that the spirit of the new age was both broadly felt and made quite visible. In actuality, far from ignoring the development of the new Renaissance style, a large proportion of the population in cities such as Florence, for example, went out of their way to interact with it. Contemporary accounts, for instance, assure us that the majority of Florentines held decided opinions about the construction of the cupola of their cathedral and that almost every inhabitant of the same city turned out to inspect a large *bozzetto* (cartoon) by Leonardo da Vinci for a painting of the Madonna and Child with St. Anne.¹¹ In fact, one can easily conclude that, as far as the centers of cultural development were concerned, there was greater knowledge of the arts and critical interest in them across a broader segment of society than is now the case. Admittedly, this was in part due to the fact that there were far fewer distractions

and forms of entertainment to occupy the attention of the populace than are available today.

Whatever the case, Renaissance thoughts did percolate into the minds of much of Italy's urban population. Certainly the new mood was felt widely, so much so that even as early as the 1430s, a Florentine businessman named Matteo Palmieri could proclaim: "Now, indeed, may every thoughtful spirit thank God that it has been permitted to him to be born in this new age, so full of hope and promise, which already rejoices in a greater array of nobly-gifted souls than the world has seen in the thousand years that have preceded it."¹² In the end, the very fact that the existence of a distinct Renaissance period continues to be debated presents a forceful argument in its favor: why challenge something that did not exist? Accordingly, the existence of a distinct period that can be labeled "the Renaissance" will not be further questioned, at least not in the context I have constructed here. That issue having been put aside, in a somewhat arbitrary fashion, the first two questions of when and where the Renaissance took place can now be addressed.

To begin with, my approach to these questions is conditioned by my bias as an art historian and an American one at that. Certainly my suggestion (really more an assertion) as to an appropriate framework for the Renaissance might be challenged forcefully by historians of philosophy, economics, music, religion, politics, science, intellectual history, and literature. Thus, in responding to the question of just when the Renaissance took place, a historian of Italian literature might say that the period began with the fourteenth-century poet and scholar Petrarch, while at the other end of the geographical and chronological spectrum, a historian of English literature would place the foundations of the period considerably later and would include William Shakespeare among its principals and even, perhaps, John Milton (a full-fledged baroque writer, in my view). Historians of both music and economics might well be tempted to delay the start of the period to the mid- or even late fifteenth century. It all depends on what subject you are concentrating upon, where your vantage point is, and where you direct your gaze (deperiodization proponents can take comfort in this).

As far as the history of art is concerned, however, the term *Renaissance* is now most commonly applied to the two-hundred-year span of time between 1400 and 1600, give or take a few years at either end. Traditionally, the Renaissance is seen as a distinct epoch following the long Middle Ages, preceding the age of the baroque, and acting as a brilliant prelude to what we, presumptuously, call "modern times."

The Renaissance proper was preceded by an introductory period of change during the fourteenth century, often known by the Italian term *trecento*. Among the leading artists in this precursory but still medieval century were Giovanni Pisano, Arnolfo di Cambio, Giotto di Bondone, Pietro Cavallini, Duccio di Buoninsegna, Simone Martini, Pietro and Ambrogio Lorenzetti, and Orcagna. Although they might well be called, from a medievalist's perspective, artists of the Gothic style, they did pave the way for many of the changes that would give renewed direction and cohesion to the next century. Among the literary figures and the philosophers who actually seem much more predictive of the new age were Petrarch, Coluccio Salutati, and Boccaccio (but not Dante, who still is locked into the mind-set of the earlier age). Boccaccio, in fact, in the course of his biography of Dante, credited Giotto with changing painting from an art of symbol into one of thought, from an expression of acceptance into an intellectual provocation.¹³ Boccaccio also saw an equation between painting and poetry, thus reviving the ubiquitous *ut pictura poesis* of Horace and later generations of aesthetes.¹⁴

The Renaissance really got under way shortly after the turn of the century, and its initial phase lasted until about 1495. Among the artists of this early Renaissance, or quattrocento, were its founding fathers, Filippo Brunelleschi, Donatello, and Masaccio, followed by Paolo Uccello, Luca della Robbia, Leon Battista Alberti, Piero della Francesca, Andrea del Castagno, and Andrea Mantegna, and then, toward the end of the era, Andrea Verrocchio, Antonio Pollaiuolo, Sandro Botticelli, Giovanni Bellini, Luca Signorelli, and Pietro Perugino. In literature and philosophy, the period was dominated by the Stoical, Ciceronian, and Neoplatonic branches of humanism represented by such personalities as Niccolò Niccoli, Poggio Bracciolini, Leonardo Bruni, Tommaso Parentucelli (Pope Nicholas V), Flavio Biondo, Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini (Pope Pius II), Cristoforo Landino, Marsilio Ficino, Pico della Mirandola, and Poliziano.

The sixteenth century, or cinquecento, embraced two (at least) phases of stylistic development. The artistic High Renaissance, which really began around 1495 (one wonders if the coming of a new century motivates a change in direction or whether centuries simply are points of historical convenience?), represented the mature, or what we might term the classic, stage of the style and lasted but briefly, expiring around 1530. Among its greatest artists were Leonardo da Vinci, Giorgione, Donato Bramante, Raphael Santi, Michelangelo Buonarroti, Tiziano Vecellio (Titian), and Antonio Allegri Correggio. In literature and philosophy, the century

began to take on a particularly modern flavor in the writings of Torquato Tasso, Lodovico Ariosto, Niccolò Machiavelli, Giordano Bruno, and Francesco Guicciardini.

The period from just before 1530 to nearly the end of the century was the time of the late Renaissance with its important early subdivision of mannerism. Many of the High Renaissance masters continued to develop their styles during this phase. Mannerism, in particular, represented the dissolution of the principles of the High Renaissance and was typified by experimentation with new sets of often conflicting or ill-defined standards of artistic values. Among the great artists who entered the scene during this final stage of the Renaissance were Jacopo Robusti (Tintoretto), Giulio Romano, Rosso Fiorentino, Francesco Mazzola (Parmigianino), Jacopo Carucci (Pontormo), Giovanni da Bologna, and Andrea Palladio (who, in many ways, would seem to stand apart).

These dates and phases within the artistic and cultural Renaissance are quite loose, of course, and there is considerable and necessary overlap at the borderlines, particularly between the high and the late (and/or mannerist) divisions of the Renaissance. Leonardo may be seen as belonging to both the early and High Renaissance; Titian, during his long life, slides nicely from High into late Renaissance; and Michelangelo, who defies the easy label, displays characteristics of the High and late Renaissance, the mannerist, and even what might be termed the proto-baroque. In any case, all of these terms are matters contrived for our convenience; that fact should be remembered even if we do continue to use them and to find them useful.

All of the names I used here are Italian ones.¹⁵ The overall dates that I have suggested for the Renaissance—1400 to 1600—also apply most easily to the unfolding of artistic events on the peninsula of Italy, and it is about Italian events that comments concerning the Renaissance can be made the most comfortably.¹⁶ I say this fully conscious that, just as many reject the use of periods, there are those who would argue against the nationalistic and ethnic boundaries imposed by tradition. After noting Giorgio Vasari's mid-sixteenth-century effort to make all artistic roads lead to Michelangelo, the historian Michael Levey warned that "what is less pardonable is the continued tendency into our own times to see the Renaissance as primarily an Italian phenomenon."¹⁷

Attention should be paid to Professor Levey's advice, yet, when all is said and done, I believe the geographical prejudice to be justifiable, for when most of us think about the Renaissance, our thoughts come out with

a decidedly Italian accent. The reasons why this is so are many and complex, but few who believe in the Renaissance would deny its Italian origins. “The reason why Italy took the lead,” John Addington Symonds wrote, “was that Italy possessed a language, and commercial prosperity, at a time when other nations were still semi-barbarous.”¹⁸ Simplistic and overstated as this statement might be, Symonds is essentially correct (not about the barbarism of the others but about Italian leadership). Italy was the birthplace of the Renaissance. It was on the Italian peninsula that the break with the medieval past was the most emphatic, and it is only natural that when we measure the artistic accomplishments of the Renaissance we use an Italian yard (or really a *braccia*) stick.

Thus, in response to the question of where the Renaissance occurred, I would answer that it was, at least for its first century, a peculiarly Italian adventure, taking place first in central Italy, and more precisely in the city of Florence, and then spreading and shifting its foci southward to Rome and Naples and northward to Milan, Mantua, Ferrara, and Venice. The true spirit of the Renaissance did not make its way over the Alps and into the northern regions of Flanders, Germany, and France (the mid-fifteenth-century painter and illuminator Jean Fouquet is the exception who proves the rule) until the very end of the fifteenth century when it finally was given derivative expression in the work of Dürer, Holbein, Altdorfer, Lambert Lombard, Frans Floris, and Jan van Scorel. During the fifteenth century, what is often termed, for chronological (and a college course designator) convenience, “Northern Renaissance Art”—the splendid paintings of Jan van Eyck, Rogier van der Weyden, Hans Memling, and Hugo van der Goes and the glorious sculptures of Tilman Riemenschneider and Michael Pacher—might be better considered as late manifestations of the medieval Gothic style. This is so despite the fact that these masters share with their Italian contemporaries like interests in space, light, and true-to-life depiction. The essential ingredient—the recognized standard of antiquity—that translated and proclaimed the true meaning of the word *Renaissance* was lacking, however, and, thus, the Renaissance was, at least in its formative stage, and as I will treat it, *una cosa italiana*. In point of fact, it was actually *una cosa fiorentina*.

Key to the whole Renaissance experience, of course, was the conscious rediscovery of Italy’s ancient heritage and Roman glory and the intentional attempt to incorporate that past into the present. The assumption that the Renaissance represented a rejection of the medieval in favor of a revival of

the classical has been challenged of late. The objection has been occasioned by the very correct recognition that the quattrocento did not renounce the medieval manner in art and culture and return to some purist, Vitruvian form of classicism. Yet, one must remember that the Renaissance humanist patron and the enlightened artist he supported may well have been antiquarian in spirit but were not classically trained archaeologists. What they sponsored and produced was a stylistic blend that looked different from the art of the immediate past and suggested revival. What was rejected in particular was the intrusion of transalpine Gothic tastes into the Italian continuum. The Renaissance began, in part, as a chauvinistic (in the proper sense of the word) endeavor. Thus, the Cathedral of Milan could be disparaged as a work of Germanic barbarism according to the new, and largely Florentine, standards of appreciation at the same time that the almost equally Gothic Duomo of Florence was being acclaimed for its novel interpretation of what was considered a stylistic evolution of the ancient, and correct, manner of building.

That contrasting stylistic metaphors actually could coexist quite happily is amply demonstrated architecturally by many a building project of Michelozzo or even at the reconstituted city of Pienza, where the cathedral blends an exuberant Germanic interior (sanctioned here by its humanist papal patron) behind a sober external veneer of classicizing paraphrases (figs. 3, 4). The simple fact is that the classical orders (and all that they implied proportionally and aesthetically), once reintroduced into the Italian canon, were simply added to the medieval vernacular and only replaced it over time.¹⁹ The rebirth of classicism came more through subversion than by revolution. Even such a scholarly critic as Leon Battista Alberti could delight in the aesthetics of the Florentine Duomo without conceding a compromise in his classical inclinations.²⁰ Such selective thinking may seem to be rather a muddle in our own more-knowing era, but it was quite in keeping with the periodizing (and nationalistic) notions of fifteenth-century Florence.

Why was it Florence that gave birth to the Renaissance, and why not Rome? At first glance, Rome seems the likeliest place for the restoration of classical ideals initially to appear. It had the glorious memories and the great ruins to inspire a reawakening of the classical tradition. But it was not Rome that was to give first birth to the revival of that European culture. Why not? Actually, it could have happened in Rome—it even may have started back in the thirteenth century with the initiative of the painter and mosaicist Pietro Cavallini—but Cavallini had no followers, at least

not local ones; his true successors were the Florentines Cimabue and Giotto di Bondone. What cut short the first Roman renaissance? Political and consequent economic fate intervened. The Avignon captivity, which relocated the papacy in southern France for three-quarters of a century, and the subsequent disappearance of the patronage framework necessary for artistic flourishing were the deciding factors in removing the cultural stimulus from Rome. The arts, like most everything else, follow the money, and when it is gone seek another berth. Then, too, the Roman economy was feudal and not entrepreneurial—it was based upon pastoralism and not mercantilism.²¹ The leading families of the Roman nobility were *bovattieri*—not the wool or silk merchants or even the bankers of Florence—and cowboys do not, as a rule, make natural patrons of the arts. Tuscany and, most especially, Florence offered an inviting refuge.

Only forty miles separate Florence and Siena, and stylistically the art of the two cities during the trecento is also close. Certainly Giotto and Duccio are different, but both masters were great innovators, following separate but parallel paths. In the next century, however, the distance between the two Tuscan cities widens into a light-years separation. Why this gap? What makes Florence progress and formerly thriving Siena lag in respect to Renaissance innovation? One could suggest some political developments as a cultural catalyst. What transpired in the intellectual and artistic life of republican Florence consequent to the city's seemingly miraculous delivery, first from the threat of the Visconti of Milan at the beginning of the fifteenth century and then from Ladislaus of Naples a few years later, echoes the experience of the Athenians following their repulse of the Persians. In both cases "miraculous victory" was celebrated in an ebullient burst of creative glory. Aristocratic Siena, on the other hand, had allied herself with the "foreign" and autocratic enemy. Thus, there are political and economic reasons to explain the differences, but the real answer lies in the respective attitudes of Siena and Florence toward humanism and the rediscovery of the classical tradition. Differences in the history of physical environments also may help explain their contrasting receptivity toward the antique.

Evolving from the gridiron layout of its Roman foundation, the city plan of Florence may have stimulated the logical thought processes that led its citizens toward "Renaissance" conceptions, while the meandering street pattern of Siena, following as it does the contours of its irregular hilltop location, suggests a more confusing and less structured organization, one more in tune with the mystical thought of the Middle Ages. Florence's Roman foundation may also be contrasted with the Etruscan traditions of

Siena, and it must be remembered that Etruscan culture was motivated by a subjective religiosity, more in keeping with later medieval thinking.

In his delightful and valuable volume *Homeless Paintings of the Renaissance*, Bernard Berenson noted the profound difference in artistic attitude between Florence and Siena as the quattrocento commenced: "The ages of ecstasy were at this time beginning to make way for ages of inquiry. It was an inquiry that dispelled the mirage of the Middle Ages, and nowhere more than in the field of art. . . . But the spirit of inquiry never found a home at Siena."²² Berenson went on to explain that "ecstasy does not invent and perfect new instruments of expression. It uses what it finds at hand." The tale of the superstitious rejection of antiquity by the Sieneze citizenry, who discovered and then destroyed a statue of Aphrodite, although it took place in the mid-fourteenth century, seems to set the mood for the next (chap. 3, this vol.).

Florence, indeed, has been awarded the Renaissance laurel, but has the prize been awarded fairly? Are there other contenders? Skeptics might wonder if the concentration of scholarship devoted to Florentine art and culture has been overweighted, perhaps, due to the accident of location, pleasant situation, and the presence of active "support group" colonies of foreign residents in the last century. Certainly, there has been a broadening of focus during the last several decades. I remember with particular clarity that great presence of Renaissance scholarship, Ulrich Middeldorf, telling me, in an aside, that had he the opportunity to do it all over again, rather than concentrating upon Florence, he might have chosen Milan as his primary locale.²³

In his 1987 review of the state of research on the art of the Italian Renaissance, William Hood noted that, of late, "even American undergraduates now see, often on their own, that Vasari's Florence-centered view of the Renaissance was not only badly skewed and even wrong but that it imposed on Venetian art a canon that was in many ways not only foreign but even inimical to it."²⁴ True enough, no doubt, but only up to a certain point. While Hood was quite correct in applauding the recent attention accorded to places other than Florence, I believe that a distinction must be drawn between the stylistic and the chronological. Venice was, for instance, a worthy competitor of Florence in terms of fifteenth-century economy, politics, and culture, but Florence was preeminent in terms of what comprises the Renaissance artistic style. One cannot help but wonder if the search for novel dissertation topics or innovative (and fundably attractive) research projects has led the art historical interests of many away from the overworked city of Florence. If so, this has been, in

many ways an enlightening—even healthy—consequence, but it might also be misleading. Florence *was* the birthplace of the Renaissance, and not just on the say-so of Giorgio Vasari and other patriotic propagandists of the city. It was truly in Florence that the Renaissance seed was first sown, and it was there that it first flourished. This was because it was in Florence that the link to the antique past was first actually appreciated and, most important, where it first was utilized. Despite all the many arguments against “the traditional view of Italian Renaissance art as the accommodation of antiquarian taste,” it was precisely just that.²⁵ Proof is found in the writings of the period itself and in how those living at the time regarded themselves and the character of their age. Citations and quotations on the pages that follow should provide an ample demonstration of the “classical” (self-) consciousness of the Renaissance. A passage from Leon Battista Alberti’s treatise *On Painting*, which appeared in 1435, should suffice for the moment as an indicator of this antiquizing revival and Florence’s pre-eminent role in the process:

But after I was brought back here to this city of ours [Florence] . . . I realized that in many, . . . there was talent for every noble thing not to be ranked below any who was ancient and famous in these arts [architecture, sculpture, painting].²⁶

George Holmes has pointed out that there were a number of humanist centers in other Italian cities in the early years of the Renaissance, and their scholars were just as significant as those based in Florence.²⁷ The difference and the historic distinction achieved by Florence is due to what its humanists did with their scholarship. “Although,” writes Holmes, “the Florentines were inordinately proud of their scholarship and their distinguishing characteristic, in retrospect, it is not their command of classical learning but the thoughts of contemporary significance which devotion to the classics inspired in them.”²⁸ It was what the classical revival led the Florentines to achieve that gave their city its recognized position of leadership. It was a matter both of recognition and application. The rediscovery of antique texts and cultural principles was but a means to a new and improved end. The Florentines truly grasped the meaning of meliorism—the key characteristic of humanist thought.

That the citizens of Florence believed in their specialness is exceedingly important to their achieving a special cultural distinction. That eminent humanist civic propagandist, Coluccio Salutati, in writing his polemic in favor of Florence (ca. 1400), proclaimed:

What town, not only in Italy, but in the whole world, has safer walls, more superb palaces, more ornate churches, more handsome buildings . . . has more inexhaustible wealth, more cultivated fields . . . what city, lacking harbor, imports, and exports so much . . . where is there greater trade, a richer variety of goods?²⁹

To which, Leonardo Bruni, writing to Salutati in the autumn of 1405 from the papal court in distant and gray Viterbo, could append, “There is no place in the world to compare with the splendor of Florence or the urbanity of the Florentines.”³⁰

A simulated Latin inscription placed by the painter Ghirlandaio on his fresco *The Angel Appearing to Zacharias* in the Tornabuoni Chapel in the church of Santa Maria Novella graphically demonstrates this sense of Florentine self-worth: “The year 1490 when the most beautiful city renowned for abundance, victories, arts, and noble buildings profoundly enjoyed salubrity and peace.”³¹ Special note should be taken of its mention of both “arts” and “noble buildings.” That they are included among the four testimonials of the city’s pride is telling and, of course, a key factor in our discussion.

All this ebullient Florentine civic pride could be proclaimed despite a drastic drop in population (from some 90,000 to 60,000 during the fourteenth century) and the ravages of flood, famine, plague, and banking collapse. In many ways, however, misfortune prepared the city for the Renaissance. Plague-accelerated population reduction freed up property for palace building and invited in new blood from the countryside; economic reversals discouraged venture capitalism and encouraged “nonproductive” investment in the arts and building, those very items included at the end of the early Renaissance in the frescoed inscription in the Tornabuoni Chapel.

Having dealt, in this rather abrupt fashion, with the two easier questions of when and where, and having stated, for the sake of argument, that the Renaissance is best defined as having taken place in Italy between 1400 and 1600, I will now wrestle, in the principal essay chapters of this volume, with the remaining and more thorny problems. Symonds posed the overall issue well:

How was it then, that at a certain period, about fourteen centuries after Christ, to speak roughly, the intellect of the Western races awoke as it were from slumber and began once more to be active?

That is a question which we can but imperfectly answer. The mystery of organic life defeats analysis; whether the subject of our inquiry be a germ cell, or a phenomenon so complex as the commencement of a new religion, or the origination of a new disease, or a new phase in civilization, it is alike impossible to do more than to state the conditions under which the fresh growth begins, and to point out what are its manifestations. In doing so, moreover, we must be careful not to be carried away by words of our own making. Renaissance, Reformation, and Revolution are not separate things, capable of being isolated; they are moments in the history of the human race which we find it convenient to name; while history itself is one and continuous, so that our utmost endeavors to regard some portion of it independently of the rest will be defeated.³²

As warned, these issues cannot be easily separated and, accordingly, must be assailed along a unified front.