

LIFE IN THE RENAISSANCE



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HORIZON • NEW WORD CITY



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I

FLORENCE

"It is undoubtedly a gold age," the humanist Marsilio Ficino wrote more than 500 years ago, "which has restored to the light the liberal arts that had almost been destroyed: grammar, poetry, eloquence, painting, sculpture, architecture, music." Ficino's compatriot Leonardo Bruni said of his town that it "harbors the greatest minds: Whatever they undertake, they easily surpass all other men, whether they apply themselves to the military or political affairs, to philosophy or to merchandise." When the architect Leon Battista Alberti came to consider what constituted a perfect human being, he decided he could do no better than to describe himself: "He was devoted," Alberti said of himself, "to the knowledge of the most strange and difficult things. And he embraced with zeal and forethought everything which pertained to fame. He strove so hard to attain a name in modeling and painting . . . his genius was so versatile that you might almost judge all the fine arts to be his. . . . He played ball, hurled the javelin, ran, leaped, wrestled, and above all delighted in the steep ascent of mountains. . . . With his feet together, he could leap over the shoulders of men standing by. . . . With his left foot lifted from the ground to the wall of a church, he could throw an apple into the air so high that it would go far beyond the top of the highest roofs. . . . He despised material gain. . . . He could endure pain, cold, and heat, showing by example that men can do anything with themselves if they will."

Succeeding generations have never thought to contradict the appraisal that Renaissance men and women gave of themselves or their time. On the contrary, later historians and enthusiasts have built upon Renaissance pride – and the attempts of Renaissance writers to cheer themselves up – a sunny, care-free, and perhaps slightly boring myth in which the people of fifteenth-century Italy are seen to have been bold universalists, individualists, optimists who entered the dawn of a new age with a warm glow of well-being, anticipation, confidence, and ease.

And yet, at night, in that model Renaissance city of Florence, more than 500 years ago, no one moved. The gates of the city were shut and locked. A curfew was imposed at sunset, and after dark, only the police and government officials and the privileged few who had special passes stirred through the nar-

row stone streets, past the iron-barred windows and massive bolted wooden doors. The only light in Florence at night came from the flickering oil lamps hung on the walls of houses to illuminate pictures of protector-saints. Overhead in the alleyways, rude arches propped one tilting house against another, and occasionally there loomed a roughhewn towered house, a fossil of medieval Florence when families held off attackers by dumping boulders and boiling oil from the tops of their fortress homes. Dogs scavenged in the garbage, picking and choosing carefully. Ever since pigs, those omnivorous street cleaners, had been banned from the city, the thoroughfares had become filthier. The decomposed refuse left a glutinous slick on the paving stones, causing falls and fatal diseases.

At night, the gates and doors of Florence were closed against thieves, murderers, marauders, and mercenary soldiers. Nothing could keep out famine, or the prolonged, implacable depression – and inflation – that buffeted Italy for centuries after the Black Death. In the 1340s, the plague had ravaged Europe, destroying whole towns, cutting down full half of the population of Florence. And, over the years, as the population would begin to increase, smaller epidemics of the bubonic plague would cut it back down, again and again, relentlessly, once every decade.

The old, familiar order was disintegrating with a savage pitilessness. Feudal barons lost their castles, lands, and serfs. Prominent old banking families, among them the Bardi, Acciaiuoli, and Peruzzi, “the pillars of Christianity,” declared bankruptcy, shaking the entire Florentine economy. The popes had become rapacious, worldly princes, entertained by crude buffoons and comedies that toyed with sexual perversion. Old republican city-states came under the sway of mercenary captains or of shrewd, manipulative, merchant-bankers who had put together novel capitalist enterprises, diversified companies that made factory wage earners of former artisans; and the influence and interests of the merchant-bankers extended ominously to other city-states and countries through octopine branch banks.

On an April night in 1478, Archbishop Francesco Salviati dangled from a rope at a window of the government palace, the Palazzo della Signoria.