



## SELF PROGRAM 2025/2026

### **The European Renaissance**

Dr. Alexander Lee

#### **Course information:**

##### **Number of credits:**

**Contact hours:** 30 hours

**Hours taught per week:** 2.5

**Teaching period:** spring semester 2026

#### **Course description:**

The Renaissance is one of the most revolutionary and vibrant periods in history. Emerging in Italy the early fourteenth century out of a new concern for the 'rebirth' of classical Greek and Roman culture, it completely transformed literature, art, music, politics, science – even how humanity itself was perceived. Yet it also grew out of immense political, economic, and religious upheaval; the changes it wrought were frequently contested; and its fruits experienced differently throughout society.

The Renaissance was never *just* an Italian phenomenon, either. Though many of its key features – e.g. humanism – had their origins in the peninsula, it was, from the first, European in scope, borne of ceaseless exchanges in the marketplace of ideas. Indeed, in many respects, it was even global, interacting continually with the voyages of discovery and the expanding horizons of knowledge.

Precisely because of its richness and diversity, the Renaissance has also been the subject of intense historiographical debate. How – and why – did it begin? To what extent did it *actually* represent a departure from what had gone before? Whose Renaissance was it? Did men and women share in it to the same extent? How did people experience art,

literature, and music? What made Machiavelli so different? Did Renaissance self-perceptions rely on the existence of the 'other'? How distinct was Renaissance science from magic?

Covering the period c.1300-c.1550, this course will examine the Renaissance from several perspectives. Each class will focus on a different theme and will be based on a close reading of selected primary texts (in English translation) and/or key secondary literature. The course structure is as follows:

### 1. Framing the Renaissance

What *was* the 'Renaissance'? *Where* did it happen? And *why* did it occur? This class will provide a broad overview to the course. It will begin by examining the historiographical debates about the nature of the Renaissance. We will then turn to explore Renaissance Italy. Themes covered will include: the centres of the Renaissance, economic life, social divisions and civil conflict, the growth of literacy, and the transformation of patronage.

**Reading (in class):** Petrarch, *Africa* (excerpts); Marsilio Ficino to Paul of Middleburg; Matteo Palmieri, *Vita civile* (excerpts); Leonardo Bruni, *Le Vite di Dante e Petrarca* (excerpts).

### 2. Humanism

Humanism was defined by a preoccupation with the recovery and emulation of the Latin and Greek classics. But how did it begin? In this class, we will examine the key debates and concepts. We will discuss the role of grammar, eloquence, and political change, as well as the evolution of humanism over time.

**Reading:** P. Mack, 'Humanism and the Classical Tradition', in G. Campbell, *The Oxford History of the Renaissance* (Oxford, 2019), 10-47; Petrarch's letters to Cicero and Posterity.

### 3. The Visual Arts

This class will examine the radical changes which took place in painting, drawing, and sculpture from Giotto to Michelangelo. It will look at: changing contexts of artistic production, the shift in the status of the artist, linear perspective, international gothic, the 'rediscovery' of classical ideals, and the impact of oils.

**Reading:** A. Lee, 'Culture and the Arts' in I. Lazzarini, *Short Oxford History of Europe: The Later Middle Ages* (Oxford, 2021), 124-8; F. Ames-Lewis, 'Art and Architecture in Italy and Beyond', in G. Cambell, *The Oxford History of the Renaissance* (Oxford, 2019), 176-208; Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite*, preface; Leon Battista Alberti, *De pittura*, 3.53.

### 4. Architecture

A story of irrepressible variation? In this class, we look at the revival of classical forms in Italian Renaissance architecture and the variety of styles that they inspired across Europe.

**Reading:** F. Ames-Lewis, 'Art and Architecture in Italy and Beyond', in G. Cambell, *The Oxford History of the Renaissance* (Oxford, 2019), 156-76; Leon Battista Alberti, *De architectura* (excerpts).

### 5. Politics and Religion

This class will begin by discussing the diversity of political forms in Renaissance Italy, republics and principalities, civic humanism and 'virtue politics'. It will then turn to the

Machiavellian 'Revolution', concentrating on concepts of 'effectual truth', fortune, and *virtù*. In a final section, we will examine the role of religion in Renaissance life, criticisms of the Church, and the growth of heterodoxy.

**Reading:** Q. Skinner, 'Political Philosophy', in C. B. Schmitt and Q. Skinner, eds., *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy* (Cambridge, 1988), 412-42; Machiavelli, *The Prince* (excerpts).

## 6. Science

This class will focus on the transition from textual criticism to observation and experimentation. It will look at: the heritage of Aristotle, Galen, Ptolemy; 'new' ways of looking at the world (Paracelsus, Copernicus, Vesalius); and the relationship between 'science' and magic.

**Reading:** P. Findlen, 'The Renaissance of Science' in G. Campbell, ed., *The Oxford History of the Renaissance* (Oxford, 2019), 379-429.

## 7. Women and the Family

How far did women share in the Renaissance? In this class, we will look at treatises on the role of the women in the family/household, women as patrons of the arts, business people, political figures, and artists. We will also consider gender and sexual culture.

**Reading:** J. Kelly-Gadol, 'Did Women Have a Renaissance?' in R. Bridenthal and C. Koonz, ed., *Becoming Visible: Women in European History* (1977), 137-64; J. C. Brown, 'A Woman's Place was in the Home: Women's Work in Renaissance Tuscany', in M. W. Ferguson et al., eds., *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourse of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe* (Chicago, 1986), 206-24.

## 7. Printing and the Spread of the Renaissance

In this class, we will discuss: manuscript production; Johannes Gutenberg's 42-line Bible; the spread of printing; the types of books printed; criticisms of printing; the 'paradoxes' of printing (e.g. inaccuracy); the continued popularity of manuscripts; the role of printing in disseminating Renaissance ideas; Aldus Manutius, Desiderius Erasmus, and Columbus' famous letter.

**Reading:** David McKitterick, 'The beginning of printing', in C. Allmand, ed., *The New Cambridge Medieval History*, vol. VII, c.1415-c.1500 (Cambridge, 2000), 287-98

## 8. A Global Renaissance?

One of the most striking features of Carlo Crivelli's *Annunciation with St. Emidius* (London: National Gallery, 1486), is the Ottoman carpet hanging from an upper window. As we shall see in this class, this is an illustration of Europe's rich and complex exchange with the wider world. In exploring its facets, we will look at trade and travel, the voyages of discovery, the construction of the 'other', the treatment of resident minorities, and the 'global' dimensions of Renaissance culture and society.

**Reading:** F. Fernández-Armesto and P. Burke, 'The Global Renaissance', in G. Campbell, *The Oxford History of the Renaissance* (Oxford, 2019), 430-64.

## Prerequisites:

None.

## Course objectives:

The objective of this course is to understand the concepts and debates at the heart of Renaissance history. It aims to encourage students to think critically about primary sources in a variety of media (written documents, paintings, architecture, music...), and to analyse their own assumptions about pre-modern history. The Renaissance lives with us in many ways, even today: from the structure of our visual imagination and the assumptions of modern science to the guiding principles of modern *realpolitik*. Understanding the Renaissance can help us to comprehend the origins of many of those ideas – and to rethink the way the past is used and abused in our own day.

## Assessment:

Students will be assessed through two written exams and a group presentation. The group presentation will be an opportunity for students to examine themes examined in class through assigned case-studies. Marks will be assigned as follows:

Participation/attendance:	10%
Midterm exam:	35%
Group presentation:	20%
Final exam:	35%

## Attendance:

Attendance is mandatory. More than two unexcused absences will result in a failing mark for the course. An unexcused absence at an assessment (either the group presentation or the final exam) will similarly result in a failing mark.

## Bibliography:

The Renaissance is such a varied – and contested – period that it is a real challenge to capture all its facets in a single book. Key readings (detailed above) will be provided in class; but the best survey work is **G. Campbell, ed., *The Oxford History of the Renaissance* (Oxford, 2019)**. This is an invaluable guide to much of the material we will cover in class and is the only book you should purchase.

The following books are also extremely useful. An asterisk (\*) indicates that a book is available in the university library.

\*P. Burke, *The European Renaissance: Centres and Peripheries* (Oxford, 1998).

J. M. Najemy, ed., *Italy in the Age of the Renaissance, 1300-1550* (Oxford, 2004).

M. L. King, *A Short History of the Renaissance in Europe* (Toronto, 2016).