SELF PROGRAM 2025/2026

The European Renaissance

Dr. Alexander Lee

Course information:

Number of credits: 6

Contact hours: 30 hours

Hours taught per week: 2.5

Teaching period: Fall semester 2025

Course description:

> "In Italy, for thirty years under the Borgias, they had warfare, terror, murder and bloodshed - they produced Michelangelo, Leonardo Da Vinci and the Renaissance. In Switzerland, they had brotherly love and five hundred years of democracy and peace, and what did they produce? The cuckoo clock!"
>
> Orson Welles, in *The Third Man* (1949)

Orson Welles' (in)famous remark is a joke, of course. But there is still some truth in it. The Renaissance is one of the most revolutionary and vibrant periods in history. Emerging in 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. And in one vital respect, Welles was wrong. The Renaissance was never *just* an Italian phenomenon. 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, however, 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'? This class 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 states of the Italian peninsula, economic life, social divisions and civil conflict, the growth of literacy, and the transformation of patronage.

> ***Reading:*** 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. Finally, we will touch on civic humanism, biblical scholarship and wider questions of 'authority'.

> ***Reading:*** Petrarch's letters to Cicero and Posterity. C. E. Quillen, 'Humanism and the lure of antiquity', in J. M. Najemy, ed., *Italy in the Age of the Renaissance, 1300-1550* (Oxford, 2004), 37-58.

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. It will then introduce Michael Baxandall's idea of the 'period eye' – that is to say, the question of people experienced Renaissance paintings and how we, as historians, can reconstruct the assumptions they brought to viewing.

> ***Reading:*** E. Panofsky, *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art* (New York, 1972), 1-41*;* Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite*, preface; Leon Battista Alberti, *De pittura*, 3.53.

4. Music, Architecture, and Science
In this class, we will cover three themes: (a) *Music*. Listening to excerpts by Guillaume de Machaut, John Dunstaple, and Josquin des Prez, we will trace its development from the *ars nova* to the *ars subtilior* and the *contenance angloise*. (b) *Architecture.* A story of irrepressible

variation? French *rayonnant* and *flamboyant*; English Decorated; Peter Parler and the reconstruction of Prague; Italian exuberance. (c) *Science*. From textual criticism to observation and experimentation; the relationship between magic and science.

> ***Reading:*** Carlo Marsuppini, letter-patent for a German musician (1466); Johannes Tinctoris, *Proportionale musices* (excerpts); 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:*** J. Hankins, 'Humanism and the origins of modern political thought', in J. Kraye, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Humanism* (Cambridge, 2006), 118-41; Machiavelli, *The Prince* (excerpts).

6. 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.

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:*** Francisco Bethencourt, 'European expansion and the new order of knowledge', in J. J. Martin, ed., *The Renaissance world* (London, 2015), 118-39; J. Brotton, *The Renaissance: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2006), 19-37.

9. The End of the Renaissance?

When did the Renaissance end? In this class, we will examine: (a) the causes and nature of the shift to new forms of political organization and patterns of cultural production (e.g. mannerism) and; (b) the legacies of the Renaissance. We will focus particularly on how the Renaissance shaped attitudes down to the present day, and how the Renaissance past is both used and misused in contemporary discourse.

> ***Reading:*** Benvenuto Cellini, *Autobiography* (excerpts).

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 following books are recommended. 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).