

Chapter 5: The New Renaissance

“I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free.” – Michelangelo

I would like to discuss what I see as a new Renaissance we have entered. Normally, when we speak of the Renaissance, we are talking of a period in European history where there was a rebirth of interest in the Classical Greek and Roman civilizations and their art, music, writing and philosophy. Renaissance actually means ‘rebirth.’ This period produced what are undoubtedly among the greatest masterpieces of all humanity. These include St. Peter’s Basilica, Da Vinci’s Last Supper, Michelangelo’s Pieta, and hundreds of other instantly recognizable artistic treasures.

In a sense, the Renaissance moved around Europe for a couple of centuries, so it isn’t so much a time as a state of mind, although it is thought to have had its apex in Italy; in Venice, Florence and Rome. By convention it is generally regarded to have ended in 1564, the year in which Michelangelo died and Shakespeare was born, ushering in the Modern Age.

It is said to be a rebirth because it was primarily interested in the past, in Classical Greek and Roman civilization. The Renaissance was triggered, in part, by the fall of the Byzantine Empire, centered in Constantinople, the city known today as Istanbul, Turkey. When the conquest of the city seemed inevitable, there was a great “brain drain” of scholars, artists, teachers, theologians, and the wealthy who emigrated to Western Europe, especially to Italy. As they fled the falling empire, they brought with them large numbers of Classical works not seen in the West for a thousand years and long thought by Europeans to have been lost. The arrival of these texts, coupled with the Byzantine’s own architecture, science, and art proved to be an overwhelming sensory and intellectual explosion that jump-started what we now call the Renaissance.

But as I said, it was backward-looking. So when it awakened what we call ‘the arts’ in Italy, they tried to recapture something they thought lost from a golden age in the past. While there are exceptions to this, it is largely the case: they were focused on the Classical Era. So much so, that when cheap printing came along thanks to Gutenberg, virtually everything printed was either Greek or Roman classics, commentaries on Greek or Roman classics, or imitations of Greek and Roman classics. It was only after the public grew weary of this that printers went off in search of completely new books that were called ‘novels’ to mark their newness. Only later did we change this term to mean narrative works of fiction.

Unquestionably, there was an extraordinary amount of talent present in the Renaissance. There was a massive investment in all forms of art and a widespread appreciation of it, in all the social classes. It was a time when the wealthy and influential tried to distinguish themselves by being patrons of the arts. It must have been quite an exciting time to be alive. It was, however, and this is sure to earn me the wrath of many humanities professors, a time of surprisingly little originality.

I say that to contrast it to the Internet Renaissance we are in right now in which not only is original art being created everywhere, but entirely new art forms are springing up as well. It is

easy to miss the Internet Renaissance that is happening around us. Because it grows gradually by the day, it is like the proverbial frog in the pot who doesn't feel the water warming up around him. Plus, we have put the Italian Renaissance on such a pedestal that it never occurs to us that our age could measure up to such a lofty time. But the Internet Renaissance dwarfs by a hundred-fold, a thousand-fold, the Renaissance of Europe. The Italian Renaissance was only participated in by a thin veneer of elites in society. While all of society may have enjoyed the frescos, music, statues, and paintings, they did not participate in the creation of these – they were only passive observers. On the Internet, there are far fewer passive observers. Almost everyone creates. In these early days of the Internet Renaissance, the number of great masters is in the tens of thousands, not the hundreds. And great masters aside, the number of people who create things online – our equivalent to painters, sculptors, composers, authors, and philosophers – is in the hundreds of millions. Almost everyone participates.

Just take one artistic expression – writing – and think about how the Internet has caused it to explode. Clive Thompson wrote a masterful essay in *Wired* about all of the handwringing over the decline in writing standards that the Internet and mobile (with its SMS) supposedly have brought about. I quote extensively from it below because he says it so well. Thompson says that while many people think new technology is having an adverse effect on writing...

Andrea Lunsford isn't so sure. Lunsford is a professor of writing and rhetoric at Stanford University, where she has organized a mammoth project called the Stanford Study of Writing to scrutinize college students' prose. From 2001 to 2006, she collected 14,672 student writing samples—everything from in-class assignments, formal essays, and journal entries to emails, blog posts, and chat sessions. Her conclusions are stirring.

"I think we're in the midst of a literacy revolution the likes of which we haven't seen since Greek civilization," she says. For Lunsford, technology isn't killing our ability to write. It's reviving it—and pushing our literacy in bold new directions.

The first thing she found is that young people today write far more than any generation before them. That's because so much socializing takes place online, and it almost always involves text. Of all the writing that the Stanford students did, a stunning 38 percent of it took place out of the classroom—life writing, as Lunsford calls it. Those Twitter updates and lists of 25 things about yourself add up.

It's almost hard to remember how big a paradigm shift this is. Before the Internet came along, most Americans never wrote anything, ever, that wasn't a school assignment. Unless they got a job that required producing text (like in law, advertising, or media), they'd leave school and virtually never construct a paragraph again.

The amount of writing we are talking about is staggering. In 2007, Google researchers estimated there were 100 trillion words on the Internet. There must be several times that by now. Google CEO Eric Schmidt famously asserted in 2010 that we create more content every two days than in the history of civilization up to 2003. There are something like fifty million blogs and billions of blog posts. Fifty million Tweets a day. More than that in Facebook status updates, every day.

Millions comment on movies, millions write reviews of products. Uncounted millions more post questions in forums and millions of answers are posted in response.

All forms of online media are exploding in a similar fashion. In 2010, people were uploading 100 million photos on Facebook every single *day*. There are at least a hundred million websites. Over a hundred million videos on YouTube. The Internet has made distributing music easy and has unleashed an astonishing amount of new material.

It turns out we all have a desire to be artists or philosophers or singers or photographers or commentators or reviewers. We all desire to leave our stamp on the world. We just couldn't ever do it before.

We are creating at a rate exponentially more than our most recent ancestors. But of course, that brings up the next question:

“But is any of it any good, really?”

My answer: Yes. Astonishingly great. Better than anything the world has ever seen.

Yes, there is art on YouTube.

There, I said it. Now, I will try to persuade you.

Let's start with a definition. By art, I am referring to creative expressions that are still relevant to future generations. Will people still consume it in fifty or a hundred years? One doesn't really know what later generations will deem to be art. Shakespeare was low-brow entertainment for the common man in his day. It was not at all clear at the time that it would transcend the ages. Far from it. I am sure kids of that day were forbidden by their parents from hanging out all day at the Globe Theater. Charlie Chaplin wasn't considered art, but a century later, his movies still make me laugh. Like Orson Welles, I consider Chaplin's *City Lights* to be best movie ever made. A. A. Milne's *Winnie the Pooh* series wasn't considered art when it came out, but nearly a century later, I reach for those books to read to my kids at night and they enjoy them as much as children from 1922. P.G. Wodehouse's *Jeeves and Wooster* books are art, which I think will be read for the next two centuries. The Beatles made art. F. Scott Fitzgerald made art as did Ernest Hemingway. Daniel Day-Lewis and Joaquin Phoenix and Ralph Fiennes are artists. I think *Phineas and Ferb* might be art and that *Hank the Cowdog* almost certainly is. But only time will tell on that.

I don't play video games, but I have certainly seen some that I think might survive the test of time. I think the backgrounds in *Myst* from two decades ago are astonishingly good and that Rand and Robyn Miller are masters. I even bought a framed print from the sequel, *Riven*, which hangs over my desk. I think John Fiorella's Untamed Cinema's trailer for *Grayson* is art, and art done on a budget as well. I think Commoncraft makes things that might be art. I think the social commentary in JibJab's work is art.

We can all be sure of one thing. Bill Watterson is a great master. *Calvin and Hobbes* is art.

So is there art on YouTube? I guarantee it. I can't tell you what will be watched in a century, but part of it will be. Actually, I can make guesses but they are almost certainly going to be spectacularly wrong and a guy doesn't want that haunting him ten years from now. I can just see me getting introduced as "the man who thought '*The Evolution of Dance*' was art..." I don't need that in my life.

Now, of course, much of what is on YouTube is not art. It can hardly even be called coherent. But in some ways, it's like antique furniture. We look at antique furniture today and say, "Man, they sure don't make stuff as good as they used to." But the truth is that almost all furniture back in the day was cheaply made junk and only a very few high-quality pieces survived. Those are the ones we call 'antiques' today. The rest was made into firewood long ago.

Further, let me point out that the Italian Renaissance was not just a flowering of the arts, but of commerce, technology, science, and trade. And in our Internet Renaissance, aren't we seeing an explosion of these same things at a more massive scale?

Who could argue there was ever a better time to start a business any time in the world? When has starting a business been so easy? The opportunity so large? The choices so wide? When has there been a time when it was more blind to color, gender, or creed? When have we seen so many billions made by so many so quickly?

And technology? Do I need to prove we have an explosion of technological progress dwarfing the wildest dreams of any age? We are suitably impressed that Da Vinci sketched a design for a submarine and a flying machine, but our age put a billion transistors on an area the size of a postage stamp. Do those two things even compare?

And science? Who could deny that we have recently seen advances in science that boggle our minds? We have mapped the genome, looked into distant galaxies, and produced the iPad, a device that seems more at home in the movie *Minority Report* than on my bedside table.

And trade? Has not the world become a seamless market? My home is full of items from all the continents of the world (well, except Antarctica). Moving items around the world is so cheap and easy that we make things that cost a dollar, or a dime, or a penny, in distant lands and transport them to where they are wanted. I could, though I certainly have no desire to, spend three dollars and drink water bottled in France and shipped to Austin, Texas where I am presently sitting. Water!

An additional feature of the Italian Renaissance that I mentioned earlier was that people of wealth distinguished themselves by some form of altruistic endeavor. Is that true of today? Vastly more so. Think about it – we pay taxes that are many times higher than 16th Century Italy, but in addition, do more charity as well. Everyone has a 'cause' they support of some kind. The Internet has allowed for the creation of thousands of new ways to give – both time and money. From one end of the spectrum with Bill Gates and Warren Buffet calling on the wealthy to give away half of all of their wealth all the way to the success of initiatives like "Tom's Shoes" where you buy a pair of shoes and an identical pair is given away in the developing world. Think of all the people who texted to give money for the Haiti disaster. Charity has become trendy – not just

for the rich, but for everyone. And then, on top of all of that, consider the open source movement and licensing mechanisms such as Creative Commons whereby people donate their intellectual ability and time to the greater good.

So yeah, I think we are in an Internet Renaissance that dwarfs anything the Medicis ever saw. I think it is “twenty hundred thousand times” (my favorite number used by Shakespeare) bigger. This is not to their discredit or even to our credit – it has been enabled by technology combined with the prosperity it helped create which has compounded over time. People have always had this tendency and ability, this latent desire to build, create, discover, and explore. We have a natural reflex to want to make beautiful things and a built-in desire to understand the world we live in and our place in it.

Before technology and prosperity, virtually everyone spent long hard days scraping together enough calories for themselves and their family to survive. A very, very few people, however, were freed from this sustenance lifestyle, either by their fortuitous birth or outstanding ability. These few were given the tools to achieve their maximum potential. Now a billion or more can dream this dream and I foresee a time not far off when everyone on the planet can. It saddens me to think of present day Da Vinci living today in a part of the world where survival alone is a full-time occupation. Doubtless all the benefit he or she could give the world will be lost. But all of that is about to change.

The Renaissance artists and thinkers had very few tools – pen and paper, paint and canvas, marble and chisel, and a few more. Today we have the Internet, vastly more versatile, almost infinite in its possibilities.

So imagine a world where everyone on this planet has access to this expanded canvas of human expression that technology has created. When everyone can live up to their maximum potential. When every Da Vinci can paint his Mona Lisa and every Dante can write his *Inferno*. Imagine a thousand new arts, none of which are even invented yet, each with a thousand new great masters.

It will be a glorious time to be alive and I believe my children will see it happen.