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Renaissance Architecture
& Its Influence

The Incredible History &
Architecture of St. Peter's Basilica

What Is Renaissance
Architecture?



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CONTENTS



4

What is Renaissance Architecture?

Ushering in a revival of ancient Greek and Roman Classical architectural forms, it supplanted the prevailing Gothic medieval aesthetic.

7

The History and Architecture of St. Peter's Basilica

Awe-inspiring, breathtaking, speechless – a visit to the St. Peter's Basilica will leave you with many emotions.



10

Renaissance Architecture & Its Influence

The wider dissemination of Classical works created a renewed interest in the Classics and a humanist way of thinking that broke with long-standing medieval notions.



13

10 of the Most Important Renaissance Buildings in Italy

As in the Classical world, Renaissance architecture was characterised by the harmony between human and mathematical proportions.



What is Renaissance Architecture?

By Kristin Hohenadel

Renaissance Architecture is a style of architecture that emerged in early 15th-century Florence, Italy. Ushering in a revival of ancient Greek and Roman Classical architectural forms, it supplanted the prevailing Gothic medieval aesthetic.

What Is Renaissance Architecture?

The Renaissance (“rebirth”) spanned two centuries, encompassing not only architecture but art and human ideals, producing multi-disciplinary giants including Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo. The lasting cultural legacy of the Renaissance makes it one of the most transformative periods in western history.

History of Renaissance Architecture

Renaissance architecture developed as part of the rebirth of classicism in Florence, Italy, circa 1400 that evolved over the next 200 years as it spread throughout Italy and then Europe. Renaissance architects in Italy took inspiration from ancient Greco-Roman ruins and early structures like the Pantheon and the Colosseum in Rome, as well as the writings of Roman architect Marcus Vitruvius (80 BC-15 BC), which were published in 1486. Rather than simply reproducing the past, Renaissance architects sought to use classical elements to innovate new structures that were rooted in history but adapted to a modern world and the development of cities.

Renaissance Architecture is generally broken down into three main periods, starting with the Early Renaissance that began around 1400 when architects began to look to antiquity for inspiration and reintroduce Classical Roman and Greek elements such as arches, columns, and domes into buildings. Early Renaissance buildings had symmetrical facades and clear, streamlined volumes that marked a change from the more complex Gothic proportions that preceded them.

Starting around 1500, the High Renaissance was a period in which the use of Classical elements adapted to contemporary 16th-century building styles was in full bloom. During the Late Renaissance starting around 1520 (also called Mannerism), the use of decorative and ornamental classical elements such as domes and cupolas became more widespread. After the return of Pope Gregory XI, this resulted in a new emphasis on Rome as the center of Christian spirituality. This commenced in the mid 15th century and gained momentum in the 16th century.

Renaissance architecture was followed by the emergence of the Baroque period around 1600. Nevertheless, hundreds of years later the architectural fruits of the Renaissance are considered some of the world's greatest built structures and its guiding principles continue to influence architects, artists, and thinkers to this day.

In the 15th century, Florence, Venice and Naples extended their power through much of the area that surrounded them, making the movement of artists possible. This enabled Florence to have significant artistic influence in Milan, and through Milan, France. As the Papal court is restored in Rome, this makes Italy the main focal point of Renaissance art and politics during this time.

Key Characteristics of Renaissance Architecture

- Focus on classical notions of beauty based on proportion and symmetry mixed with a humanist perspective on architecture
- Renaissance architecture strove to create harmony between humans and mathematical proportions by creating a human-scale classical geometry
- Characterized by square, symmetrical building plans
- Employed the use of Classical elements such as domes, columns, pilasters, lintels, arches, and pediments in an orderly and repetitive fashion, adapted to then contemporary purposes
- Use of Roman orders of Doric, Ionic, Corinthian, Tuscan, and Composite columns
- Early Renaissance buildings focused on bringing in air and light, which was also a nod to the dawning of Renaissance ideals and thought History of Renaissance Architecture and thinkers to this day.

Notable Example of Renaissance Architecture

Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore in Florence, Italy. Considered the first Renaissance architect, Filippo Brunelleschi (1377-1446) is the early Renaissance pioneer responsible for the famous red brick Duomo at the Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore in Florence. The majestic dome is not only the building's crowning feature, it is a feat of engineering that was ahead of its time. It is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site and a significant landmark.





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The Incredible History & Architecture of St. Peter's Basilica

Stand at the base of the ancient Egyptian Obelisk 'The Witness' in St. Peter's Square and an overwhelming feeling starts to dawn on you. The vast colonnade seems to embrace you from both sides, even as you crane your neck to admire the imposing facade and the dome of St. Peter's Basilica. Awe-inspiring – a visit to the St. Peter's Basilica will leave you with many emotions.

The largest church in the world, St. Peter's Basilica is more than just the most important building in Christendom. It is a jewel within Vatican City from where Popes have spread the word of God throughout the world. The Basilica is a focal point of millions of pilgrims each year, but it is also a true cultural, historical and architectural landmark. It gives everyone who visits a sense of love and awe.

While visiting this iconic structure, don't miss out on a fascinating part: the St. Peter's Basilica Dome; it is known as the symbol of the Church of Rome.

The classic Renaissance structure holds within itself treasures from millennia including paintings, sculptures, artefacts and the art decorated on the walls. A visit to St. Peter's Basilica is a treat to the senses and the soul!



History of St. Peter's Basilica

The story of St. Peter's Basilica begins with the crucifixion of Peter, one of the apostles of Jesus, in 64 AD. He was crucified upside down on a cross in Circus of Nero and buried nearby on what is now the Vatican Hill. Emperor Constantine the Great built the Old Basilica between 319 AD and 333 AD on the grounds of the burial spot of St. Peter. Later, in the 16th Century at the behest of Pope Julius II, the current St. Peter's Basilica was built.

St. Peter's Basilica is currently a Papal Basilica and is famous for being the site of St. Peter's Tomb and the Chair of St. Peter, which confers a spiritual authority to the Pope. However, it is not the official Basilica of the Pope, but all

major Papal functions and events are conducted here due to its sheer size and importance.

St. Peter's Basilica holds a lot of records including the largest church building in the world, second tallest building in Rome and the tallest dome in the world. Apart from that it is also conferred as a UNESCO World Heritage Site for the wealth of art and culture it embodies and preserves. This makes it a spot to visit for everyone, not just art lovers.

St. Peter's Basilica Architecture

The construction of St. Peter's Basilica took over a century in the making! The planning of the Basilica started when Pope Julius II commissioned a competition to design the grandest building in Christendom. The winner of the competition

was Donato Bramante, and the foundation stone was laid in 1506. A series of deaths and personnel changes led to the change of architects from Bramante to Raphael to eventually Michelangelo in 1547.

The final St. Peter's Basilica dome and the architecture are accredited to the brilliance of Michelangelo who based it on the designs of Bramante. The Basilica is built in the traditional Renaissance architecture and has been an inspiration for church buildings across the world. The iconic facade was designed by Maderno and remains an unforgettable memory in millions of pilgrims who visit it each year to see the Pope.

St. Peter's Basilica Highlights

Cupola. The St. Peter's Basilica Dome or the Cupola is one of the largest domes in the world. The design of the Dome is attributed to Michelangelo; however, the construction of the dome was completed only in 1590, by his pupil Giacomo Della Porta. The cupola has several elements across six concentric circles, including 16 large windows, busts, frescos and figurines of over 96 figures. You can climb 231 steps or take the elevator to reach the base and climb. It is a magnificent display of art and architecture combined and is truly a sight to behold.

Vatican Grottoes. St. Peter's Basilica is also the resting ground of several popes and historical figures, and you can find their graves in the underground level known as the Vatican Grottoes. There are more than 100 such tombs, as well as chapels, dedicated to the popes and saints. These grottoes, or artificial caves, have elaborate designs and are decorated with frescos, sarcophagi, and paintings.

St. Peter's Tomb. St. Peter was said to be crucified in Caligula's Circus back in 64 C.E. and buried at a spot on the Vatican Hill. Later, during the reign of Constantine, a church was built on the tomb of St. Peter, which was later turned into the present St. Peter's Basilica in the 16th century. Currently, the Confession area is created in front of St. Peter's Tomb to commemorate his martyrdom. The baldachin and the dome are created directly above the tomb, and several popes are buried below the tomb in the Vatican Necropolis. There is however a lack of consensus whether the tomb really contains the remains of St. Peter!

Pieta. The Pieta is one of the most recognisable statues in the world and was created by the Italian Master Michelangelo. The Carrara marble structure depicts Jesus after his crucifixion in the lap of Mother Mary. Almost 6 feet in height, the sculpture towers and exudes a monumental aura that portrays the sanctity of the moment. Pieta roughly translates to Pity in English, is the only sculpture that was signed by Michelangelo and was created in the late 15th century. You can find this breathtaking statue in the first chapel on the right as soon as you enter St. Peter's Basilica. Make sure to keep an eye out and prepare to be awe struck.

Statue of St. Longinus. The Statue of St. Longinus is in a gallery 'loggia' at one of the crossings in the St. Peter's Basilica. This statue towers over 13 feet and was sculpted by Bernini. The evocative marble sculpture is of the Roman centurion, St. Longinus, who pierced Jesus with a lance but who converted to Christianity after Christ's death. The statue was built in 1643 and took over four blocks of marble to create this masterpiece. It brings to life a figure in Christianity like never before.





Renaissance Architecture & Its Influence

By Jackie Craven

This “age of awakening” in Italy and northern Europe became known as the Renaissance, which means born anew in French. The Renaissance in European history left behind the Gothic era; it was a new way for writers, artists, and architects to look at the world after the Middle Ages. In Britain, it was the time of William Shakespeare, a writer who seemed to be interested in everything, art, love, history, and tragedy. In Italy, the Renaissance flourished with artists of innumerable talents.

Before the dawn of the Renaissance, Europe was dominated by asymmetrical and ornate Gothic architecture. During the Renaissance, however, architects were inspired by the highly symmetrical and carefully proportioned buildings of Classical Greece and Rome.

Classical Texts Influential to This Day

A Classical approach to architecture spread through Europe, thanks to books by two important Renaissance architects. Originally printed in 1562, *the Canon of the Five Orders of*

Architecture by Giacomo da Vignola (1507 to 1573) was a practical textbook for the 16th-century builder. It was a “how-to” pictorial description for building with different types of Greek and Roman columns. As an architect Vignola had a hand in St. Peter’s Basilica and the Palazzo Farnese in Rome, Villa Farnese, and other large country estates for the Catholic elite of Rome.

Palladio’s Redentore and San Giorigo Maggiore in Venice, Italy are not the Gothic sacred places of the past, but with columns, domes, and pediments they are reminiscent of Classical architecture.

Filippo Brunelleschi’s Influence

Florence, Italy is often considered the center of the Early Italian Renaissance. During the early 1400s, the painter and architect Filippo Brunelleschi (1377-1446) designed the great Duomo (cathedral) dome in Florence (c. 1436), so innovative in design and construction that even today it’s called Brunelleschi’s Dome.

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10 of the Most Important Renaissance Buildings in Italy

By Léonie Chao-Fong

Originating in Florence in the early 15th century, Renaissance architecture reflected the “rebirth” of Classical culture. The style spread throughout Europe, replacing the medieval Gothic style. As in the Classical world, Renaissance architecture was characterized by the harmony between human and mathematical proportions.



Key architectural elements of Renaissance buildings included columns, pilasters, pediments, entablatures, arches, and domes. The three key Renaissance architects were Filippo Brunelleschi, Leon Battista Alberti, and Andrea Palladio.

Renaissance's 3 Phases

Historians often divide the Renaissance in Italy into three phases. Whereas art historians might talk of an Early Renaissance period, in which they include developments in 14th-century painting and sculpture, this is usually not the case in architectural history. The bleak economic conditions of the late 14th century did not produce buildings that are part of the Renaissance. As a result, the word Renaissance among architectural historians usually applies to the period 1400 to c. 1525, or later in the case of non-Italian Renaissances.

Quattrocento (c. 1400–1500) The study of classical antiquity led to the adoption of Classical detail and ornamentation. Space was organized by proportional logic, its form and rhythm subject to geometry, rather than being created by intuition as in Medieval buildings. The prime example of this is the Basilica di San Lorenzo in Florence by Filippo Brunelleschi (1377–1446).

High Renaissance (c. 1500–1525) The most representative architect is Donato Bramante (1444–1514), who expanded the applicability of classical architecture to contemporary buildings. His Tempietto di San Pietro in Montorio (1503) was directly inspired by circular Roman temples. He was, however, hardly a slave to the classical forms and it was his style that was to dominate Italian architecture in the 16th century.

Mannerism (c. 1520–1600) Architects experimented with using architectural forms to emphasize solid and spatial relationships. The Renaissance ideal of harmony gave way to more imaginative rhythms. The best known architect associated with the Mannerist style was Michelangelo (1475–1564), who frequently used the giant order in his architecture, a large pilaster that stretches from the bottom to the top of a façade.

1. St Peter's Basilica

Designed by Alberti, Raphael, Bramante, Michelangelo, and Bernini, St Peter's Basilica was perhaps the most renowned

work of Renaissance architecture. Its artistry, architectural grandeur and sheer mass cemented the status of Rome as the home of Christianity. Its iconic dome, designed by Michelangelo, is the tallest in the world. Inside, St Peter's holds some of the most beautiful examples of Renaissance sculpture, including Michelangelo's Pieta (1500) and the baldachin by Bernini over the main altar.

2. Duomo Santa Maria del Fiore

Structurally, Florence Cathedral belongs to the Gothic style. Its dome, however, was a forerunner of Renaissance architecture. The idea and plan for the entire building had been conceived in 1293, before the Renaissance period, however the technology to complete the dome did not yet exist. It was not until Filippo Brunelleschi that the Cathedral was finally given a dome, more than a century later. Brunelleschi came up with a daring approach to vault the dome space without any scaffolding by using a double shell with a space in between. With over 4 million bricks, a diameter 45.52m and height of 90m, it was the largest dome in the world until 1881.

3. Basilica of Santa Maria Novella

Santa Maria Novella was the first great basilica in Florence and one of the most well-known examples of early Renaissance architecture in Italy. Its elegant and harmonious marble facade was created by Leon Battista Alberti, who combined the ideals of humanist architecture, proportion and classically inspired detailing. The church holds frescoes by masters of the early Renaissance, including Masaccio's 'The Holy Trinity'.

4. Tempietto del Bramante

The tiny, round temple by Donato Bramante sits inside the courtyard of the church of San Pietro in Montorio in Rome, on the spot where St Peter was crucified. A small commemorative tomb, the Tempietto ("small temple") is considered a masterpiece of High Renaissance Italian architecture and thought to be the prototype of St Peter's Basilica.

5. Palazzo Pitti

The Pitti Palace was first built for the Pitti family and designed by Brunelleschi and built by his pupil Luca Fancelli.

In 1549, it was bought by the Medici family and became the chief residence of the ruling families of the Grand Duchy of Tuscany. It was later used as a power base by Napoleon in the late 18th century and briefly served as the principal royal palace of the newly united Italy.

6. Palazzo Vecchio

The Palazzo Vecchio was the main symbol of civil power for the city of Florence – the cradle of the Italian Renaissance. The Renaissance masters Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo were commissioned to create the murals the ‘Battle of Anghiari’ and ‘Battle of Cascina’. The so-called Quartieri Monumentali hold artworks by Michelangelo, Giorgio Vasari and Donatello, creating an art dreamscape for many. This Palazzo is a wonderful place to visit.

7. Basilica of San Lorenzo

Brunelleschi was commissioned to design a replacement of the earlier Romanesque church. However, the building was not completed until after his death, and not entirely according to his designs. It is nonetheless still seen as one of the best examples of Renaissance architecture, featuring architecture and art by Michelangelo and the final works by Donatello. The basilica is the burial places of all the principal members of the Medici family.

8. Ospedale degli Innocenti

Ospedale degli Innocenti (“Hospital of the Innocents”) was designed by Brunelleschi and originally intended as a

children’s orphanage. Brunelleschi arranged the refectory, cloisters, dormitories, infirmary, nurses, rooms and porticoes to create a harmonious and rational balance.

The hospital, which features a nine bay loggia facing the Piazza SS. Annunziata, was built and managed by the “Arte della Seta” or Silk Guild of Florence. The guild was one of the wealthiest in the city and, like most guilds, took upon itself philanthropic duties. Today the building houses a small museum of Renaissance art with works by Luca della Robbia, Sandro Botticelli, and Piero di Cosimo, as well as an Adoration of the Magi by Domenico Ghirlandaio.

9. Biblioteca Marciana

Located in Venice’s St Mark’s Square, the Biblioteca Marciana is a masterpiece of Jacopo Sansovino and a key example of Venetian Renaissance architecture. One of the earliest surviving public libraries, the biblioteca still holds one of the most impressive collections of classical texts in the world.

10. Basilica of Sant’Andrea, Mantua

One of the most important works of 15th century Renaissance architecture in Northern Italy, the Basilica of Sant’Andrea is considered one of Alberti’s most complete works. Modelled on the Roman triumphal arch, the basilica’s facade is defined by a large central arch flanked by Corinthian pilasters. The building, however, was only finished 328 years later. The church is still considered to be one of Alberti’s most complete works.



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