Niccolò Machiavelli

Niccolò Machiavelli was born in 1469 in Florence, Italy. He was a major political figure of the Renaissance. He is considered to be the “father of modern political theory.” Machiavelli was a diplomat and writer. He died on June 21, 1527, in Florence, Italy.

Background and Personality

Machiavelli’s family was noble but not wealthy. His father was a lawyer and ensured that his son received an excellent education. In 1498, Machiavelli became a secretary of the Florentine Republic. In that role, he was responsible for diplomatic correspondence and diplomatic missions to foreign states.

The Florentine Republic arose after the ruling Medici family was ousted. Machiavelli organized a citizen militia to defend the republic, but failed. The Medici family returned to power and Machiavelli was dismissed from his position, arrested, imprisoned, and tortured for 22 days.

Beliefs and Achievements

Throughout his life, Machiavelli wrote books and plays. His most famous work is The Prince. The main theme of this short work about monarchical rule and survival is man's capacity for determining his own destiny in opposition to the power of fate, which has been interpreted as the political philosophy that one may resort to any means in order to establish and preserve total authority. The work has been regarded as a handbook for politicians on the use of ruthless, self-serving cunning, and inspired the term "Machiavellian."

Unlike others who had come before him, Machiavelli was not concerned with how a perfect society should operate; he focused on how society actually operates. The nature of humanity is that it is corrupt, he believed. When given a chance, all men and women will turn to evil and self-gratification. The wise prince must never be lulled into thinking that his subjects will fail to seek their own self-interest at the earliest opportunity.

Machiavelli’s writings were a striking departure from all political discourse that had preceded him. In his writings, history was not the product of God's providence; history was the story of human actions. Machiavelli’s realism and humanism often made him a critic of the Catholic Church. Religion, he felt, is important if it aids society and upholds the state. However, Christianity’s glorification of the meek leaves the world open to oppression by the arrogant and the wicked.

Quotations from Machiavelli’s The Prince

“Since love and fear can hardly exist together, if we must choose between them, it is far safer to be feared than loved.”

“If an injury has to be done to a man it should be so severe that his vengeance need not be feared.”

“The first method for estimating the intelligence of a ruler is to look at the men he has around him.”


Lorenzo de' Medici, called "Lorenzo the Magnificent," was the most illustrious member of the brilliant Medici family. A famous patron of the arts, he was responsible for cultivating some of the most extraordinary talents of the Renaissance, including Botticelli, Michelangelo, and Leonardo da Vinci.

Background and Personality

Medici was born on January 1, 1449 in Florence, Italy. His father was a wealthy banker and de facto ruler of the Florentine Republic. When his father died in 1469, he and his younger brother Giuliano took control of the money and the rule of the city. His brother was killed in a plot by another banking family that was backed by Pope Sixtus IV. After the Medici punished the conspirators (by letting a crowd of Florentines kill them), the pope and Naples declared war on Florence and demanded that Medici be handed over to them. Medici used diplomacy to put a stop to the hostilities—following his family's tradition of promoting peace among the Italian states. That action further enhanced his status among his own people, who called him "the Wise." It also allowed him to make constitutional changes that increased his power; he created a council of 70 to replace the former Cento, or council of 100, hoping that the smaller group would be easier to control.

Talents and Accomplishments

Medici is best known as a patron of the arts. He himself enjoyed collecting ancient texts and writing poetry, preferring to write in the local Tuscan dialect instead of the more conventional Latin. He gathered at his court all the leading artists and intellectuals of the time. He supported artists like Botticelli, da Vinci and Michelangelo (whom he brought up in his house as part of his family) as well as philosophers and writers. Medici liked to entertain his artist friends lavishly in his several villas and was known for the warm affection he showed them.

Quotations

“What I have dreamed in an hour is worth more than what you have done in four.”

“If you knew how hard it is to obtain perfection in any wart, you would overlook shortcomings.”

Cool Fact

Lorenzo de' Medici appears as a character in Assassin's Creed II.
Lorenzo de' Medici

Portrait by Agnolo Bronzino
Johannes Gutenberg was born 1395 in Germany. He started experimenting with printing by 1438. He obtained backing in 1450 from the financier Johann Fust, whose impatience and other factors led to Gutenberg's loss of his establishment to Fust in 1455. Gutenberg's masterpiece, and the first book ever printed from movable type, is the “Forty-Two-Line” Bible, completed no later than 1455.

Watch the video here:
Johannes Gutenberg

Gutenberg Bible
Francesco Petrarch

Francesco Petrarch was born on July 20, 1304, in Italy. He became among the most celebrated creative figures in Italian literature. Sometimes called the "father of humanism," he is credited with recovering and collecting several valuable manuscripts of important Greek and Roman writers that may have otherwise been lost, making a major contribution to the future of humanist scholarship.

Background and Personality

With his family, he moved to Avignon, France, as a child. At approximately 16 years old, Petrarch traveled to Bologna, where he studied law for nearly six years at the behest of his father, who wanted his son to receive a legal education. However, his passion was for literature, particularly that of ancient Greece and Rome. After his father's death in 1326, Petrarch left law to focus on the classics.

Achievements and Talents

Petrarch became a cleric which supported him as he pursued his interest in ancient literature. Traveling as a diplomatic envoy for the Church, he was also able to search for forgotten classical texts. Throughout his lifetime, Petrarch amassed an impressive collection of such texts.

As Petrarch learned more about the classical period, he believed that humanity could once more reach the heights of past accomplishments. The doctrine he supported became known as humanism, and formed a bridge from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance.

As one of the world's first classical scholars, Petrarch unearthed vast stores of knowledge in the lost texts he discovered, while his philosophy of humanism helped stir intellectual growth and accomplishments of the Renaissance.

Petrarch's other passion was writing. He wrote poems, letters, histories and more. His vernacular writing was immortalized when it was used—alongside the works of Dante and Boccaccio—as the foundation for the modern Italian language.

Quotations by Petrarch

True, we love life, not because we are used to living, but because we are used to loving. There is always some madness in love, but there is also always some reason in madness.

It is more honorable to be raised to a throne than to be born to one. Fortune bestows the one, merit obtains the other.

Cool Fact

Petrarch’s love poems are about a woman named Laura in saw in a church. Although some believe that the two never actually met, Laura inspired Petrarch in a prolific outpouring of Italian love poems. She supposedly died of the Black Death in 1348, and he wrote about grief and despair over the loss of this love.
Francesco Petrarch

The Sonnets, Triumphs, & Other Poems of Petrarch
The painter Raphael is considered one of the great masters of the Italian Renaissance. His work is revered all over the world, and unlike many of his contemporaries, he enjoyed great prestige and material success in his own lifetime. His paintings hang in the finest museums and are reproduced in thousands of books.

Background and Personality
Raphael was born in 1483 in Italy. Although his artist father died when he was 11 years old, Raphael was surrounded by the talented and wealthy as he grew up. He gained some recognition for his church paintings, commissioned portraits, and pictures of saints.

In 1514, Pope Julius II hired Raphael as his chief architect. When Julius died, Raphael became a favorite of the next pope, Leo X.

Raphael found time to enjoy the fine living that his position brought him. While he enjoyed a series of mistresses, Raphael was never tempted to marry and was apparently very happy with his well-paid bachelor status. He worked for the powerful, and his work was highly valued, yet he never involved himself in politics or the schemes of others.

Raphael died at the age of 37 in 1520, apparently of a fever for which he was bled by doctors, then a common practice. Raphael's funeral took place on the Pantheon in Rome, and his last picture, *The Transfiguration* (probably finished by assistants), was displayed over his coffin.

Achievements and Talents
In 1504, Raphael moved to Florence, where he was heavily influenced by the works of the Italian painters Fra Bartolommeo, Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo and Masaccio. By closely studying the details of their work, Raphael managed to develop an even more intricate and expressive personal style than was evident in his earlier paintings.

Raphael produced a series of "Madonnas," which extended on Leonardo da Vinci's works. Raphael created his most ambitious work in Florence, the *Entombment*, which was evocative of the ideas that Michelangelo had recently expressed in his *Battle of Cascina*.

Raphael moved to Rome in 1508 to paint in the Vatican. Raphael’s work became one of the Italian High Renaissance’s most highly regarded fresco cycles. The best known work is *The School of Athens*. In the fresco cycle, Raphael expressed the humanistic philosophy that he had learned as a boy.

Cool fact
Along with Michelangelo, Donatello and Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael is forever remember by kids as a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle.


Raphael
Michelangelo

Michelangelo (1475–1564) was one of the leading artists of the Renaissance. He was born in a small village near Florence and grew up to be one of the greatest painters and sculptors in history. He was also a talented poet and architect. Of all these arts, he preferred sculpture because it seemed to bring his subjects to life.

**Background and Personality**

Historians say that Michelangelo had a difficult childhood. His mother died when he was six years old. His father was stern and demanding. Perhaps this troubled early life contributed to Michelangelo’s famously bad temper. Although he was very religious, he was known to use fierce words when he was angry. He was also intensely ambitious.

Michelangelo’s Pietà shows Mary tenderly holding the body of Jesus across her lap. He carved the two figures from one block of marble. The sculpture is in the shape of a pyramid, with Mary’s head forming the apex, or tip.

Two other magnificent sculptures by Michelangelo are his David and Moses. Michelangelo’s David is about 17 feet tall. The statue combines great beauty with the intense look of a youth who is about to go into battle. Michelangelo’s Moses is a strong, powerful figure. The statue shows Moses holding the Ten Commandments, which the Bible tells he received from God.

When Michelangelo was 13, he became an apprentice to a painter in Florence, Italy. At 15, he began studying with a sculptor who worked for the powerful Medici family. Michelangelo lived for a time in the Medici household. There he met many leading thinkers, artists, and writers.

**Talents and Achievements**

Michelangelo was gifted in both sculpture and painting. His art combines Renaissance ideals of beauty with emotional expressiveness. Michelangelo’s sculptures show his amazing talent for carving lifelike figures from single blocks of marble. When he was just 24, he carved his famous Pietà. A pietà is a depiction of Mary, the mother of Jesus, mourning over her dead son.

Michelangelo is perhaps best known for painting the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, the pope’s chapel in Rome. Michelangelo labored for almost four years on a high platform to complete this work. He covered the curved ceiling with brilliantly colored scenes from the Bible. The scenes contain over three hundred figures and continue to awe visitors to Rome today.

**Quotations from Michelangelo**

“My soul can find no staircase to Heaven unless it be through Earth’s loveliness.”

“If people knew how hard I worked to get my mastery, it wouldn’t seem so wonderful at all.
Michelangelo’s *David* is one of the world’s best known sculptures. The expression shows the concentration and tension of a real youth headed to battle.

Located in St. Peter’s Basilica, the Pietà is a life-like depiction of Mary tenderly holding the body of Jesus across her lap.

This is a part of the ceiling Michelangelo painted in the Sistine Chapel in Rome. It is covered with brilliantly colored scenes from the Bible.
Shakespeare

William Shakespeare (1564–1616) was born in the English town of Stratford-on-Avon. He was a major figure of the English Renaissance. He is widely considered to be the world’s greatest playwright and one of its finest poets.

Background and Personality
As a boy, Shakespeare studied Latin and classical literature in grammar school. He never went to a university. His plays, however, show a broad knowledge of many subjects, from history and politics to music and art.

In his early twenties, Shakespeare became an actor with a theater company in London. He learned about drama by performing and writing plays. Many of his plays were first presented at London’s Globe Theatre. Queen Elizabeth, among many others, enjoyed his work.

Shakespeare had a reputation for being quiet and a bit mysterious. His writings show that he was curious and keenly observant. He thought deeply about life and its sufferings. Yet he also had a sense of humor and found much to laugh at in life.

Talents and Achievements
Shakespeare was a skilled actor, but he was an even greater poet and playwright. He had an enormous talent for expressing thoughts and feelings in memorable words. His plays show that he had a deep understanding of human behavior and emotions. Above all, he had the skill to present his understanding through vivid characters and exciting drama.

Shakespeare’s poetry is widely admired, especially the 14-line poems called sonnets. He is best known, however, for his 38 plays. He wrote both comedies and tragedies. Many of his plays are still performed around the world, and several have been made into television series or movies. Among the most popular are Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet, Macbeth, Julius Caesar, All’s Well That Ends Well, and The Merchant of Venice.

Shakespeare’s plays cover a wide range of subjects. He wrote about history, romance, politics, prejudice, murder, and war. His plays remain popular in part because he wrote about timeless, universal themes such as love, jealousy, power, ambition, hatred, and fear.

Shakespeare has had a deep influence on later writers. He also left a lasting mark on the English language. Many common sayings come from Shakespeare, such as “Much ado about nothing.” People often quote his witty, wise lines, sometimes without knowing that they owe their clever or graceful words to Shakespeare.

Quotations from Shakespeare

“All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players: they have their exits and their entrances; and one man in his time plays many parts.”

“To thine own self be true, and it must follow, as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man.”

“Neither a borrower nor a lender be.”

“Parting is such sweet sorrow.”

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In 1599, Shakespeare helped build the Globe Theatre in London, where his plays were performed.

Shakespeare wrote many 14-line poems, called sonnets. This is Sonnet 18, one of his most famous.

**SONNET XVIII**

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?  
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:  
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,  
And summer's lease hath all too short a date:  
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,  
And often is his gold complexion dimm'd;  
And every fair from fair sometime declines,  
By chance or nature's changing course untrimm'd;  
But thy eternal summer shall not fade  
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st;  
Nor shall Death brag thou wander'st in his shade,  
When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st:  
So long as men can breath or eyes can see,  
So long lives this and this gives life to thee.
Leonardo da Vinci

One of the most creative Renaissance thinkers was Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519). Leonardo was an artist, a scientist, an engineer, and an inventor. He was born in a village near Florence in Italy. His wide range of interests and accomplishments made him a true Renaissance man.

Background and Personality
Leonardo trained in Florence under a master sculptor and painter. Leonardo was endlessly curious about all aspects of the world around him. He did not accept anything as true until he had proved it himself. In his notebooks, he made sketches and wrote about an amazing variety of topics. He studied many subjects, including painting, sculpture, music, geometry, anatomy, botany, architecture, and engineering.

Leonardo spent much of his life in Florence and Milan. He worked as an artist, engineer, and architect for kings, popes, and wealthy commoners. He had a special love for animals. Sometimes he bought caged animals at the market and set them free. He also was a vegetarian, which was quite unusual at the time.

Talents and Achievements
Leonardo was gifted in many fields. He was an accomplished painter, sculptor, architect, and engineer.

Leonardo’s notebooks show him to be one of the greatest creative minds of all time. He closely studied anatomy, including the circulation of blood and the workings of the eye, and proportions. He made precise drawings of people, animals, and plants. He also sketched out ideas about geometry and mechanics, the science of motion and force. He learned about the effects of the moon on Earth’s tides. He was the first person to draw maps from an aerial, or above-ground, view. He designed weapons, buildings, bridges and a variety of machines. Many of the inventions he imagined, such as a helicopter, an underwater diving suit, and a submarine, were centuries ahead of their time.

Leonardo’s paintings are among the world’s greatest works of art. One of his masterpieces is the Mona Lisa, a painting of a woman with a mysterious smile. It is one of the most famous paintings in the world. Like his other works, it displays a remarkable use of perspective, balance, and detail. The rich effects of shade and color reveal Leonardo’s close study of light. Students of his art also detect how principles of geometry helped him organize the space in his paintings.

Leonardo’s work inspired other great artists, such as Michelangelo. With his many interests and talents, Leonardo is a perfect example of the spirit of the Renaissance.

Quotations from Leonardo da Vinci

“It had long since come to my attention that people of accomplishment rarely sat back and let things happen to them. They went out and happened to things.”

“The truth of things is the chief nutriment of superior intellects.”

“Human subtlety will never devise an invention more beautiful, more simple or more direct than does nature because in her inventions nothing is lacking, and nothing is superfluous.”
Leonardo da Vinci
Johannes Gutenberg started experimenting with printing by 1438. In 1450 Gutenberg obtained backing from the financier, Johann Fust, whose impatience and other factors led to Gutenberg's loss of his establishment to Fust several years later. Gutenberg's masterpiece, and the first book ever printed in Europe from movable type, is the “Forty-Two-Line” Bible, completed no later than 1455. Gutenberg died in Mainz in 1468.

Background and Personality

Born into a modest merchant family in Mainz, Germany, circa 1395, Johannes Gutenberg’s work as an inventor and printer would have a major impact on communication and learning worldwide. There is little recorded history of his early life, but local records indicate he apprenticed as a goldsmith while living in Mainz.

Achievements and Talents

Johannes Gutenberg enjoyed reading and often said it was a pity that only rich people could own books. As an adult, Gutenberg decided to invent some easy and quick ways of printing. He did a great deal of his work secretly in a workshop in Strasbourg.

Gutenberg took some existing technologies and some of his own inventions to come up with the printing press in the year 1450. One key idea he came up with was moveable type. Rather than use wooden blocks to press ink onto paper, Gutenberg used moveable metal pieces to quickly create pages. He made innovations all the way through the printing process enabling pages to be printed much more rapidly. His presses could print 1000's of pages per day versus 40-50 with the old method. This was a dramatic improvement and allowed books to be acquired by the middle class and spread knowledge and education like never before. The invention of the printing press spread rapidly throughout Europe and soon thousands of books were being printed on printing presses.

It is thought that the first printed item from the press was a German poem. Other prints included Latin Grammars and indulgences for the Catholic Church. Gutenberg’s real fame came from producing the Gutenberg Bible. It was the first time a Bible was mass produced and available for anyone outside of the church. Bibles were rare and could take up to a year for a priest to transcribe. Gutenberg printed around 200 of these in a relatively short time.

If an entire Gutenberg Bible should become available on the world market, it would likely sell for an estimated 100 million dollars!

Quotations from Gutenberg

“It is a press, certainly, but a press from which shall flow in inexhaustible streams...Through it, God will spread His Word.”

Johannes Gutenberg

Gutenberg Bible