
Renaissance man. What does it mean?

When you hear the word “Renaissance Man”, the first name that usually pops up in a person’s head is that of Leonardo da Vinci. Da Vinci is the epitome of the Renaissance humanist ideal. He was not only an outstanding painter, but also an engineer, inventor, scientist, and philosopher. Leonardo was born the illegitimate son of a wealthy legal notary in Florence. His father kept on changing women, usually marrying women way younger than himself (including a 16 year old and a 20 year old), however he did take care of his little son as well. At 14, Leonardo became an apprentice in the studio of the painter Verrocchio. This apprenticeship is one of the main reasons why da Vinci became the man that he became. It set him on the path to becoming the ideal Renaissance Man. When thinking of a painter’s studio, most people will picture some brushes and a canvas, but a Renaissance painting studio was much more than that. It was in fact a mini-incubator for people who could do a variety of things. Verrocchio encouraged his students to study anatomy in order to be able to correctly draw the human body. So the young Leonardo spent countless hours studying the body and all its features, even performing dissections. Painters of that period also had to be skilled in chemistry, as they kept on experimenting with new materials in order to try to create the best colors possible. Being skilled in anatomy and chemistry were just a fraction of the things that Renaissance artists had to know in order to be able to create their works. This made them very different from modern artists. The artists of that period had to be jacks of all trades and in many ways resembled scientists, always experimenting and trying to come up with new ways of doing things. The fact that he started off as a painter, gave Leonardo a very special tilt to his scientific explorations. His way of examining the world was very different from that of other scientists. His theorizing heavily integrated the arts and painting. Through paintings and sketches, he tried to capture what is really happening in order to study it better, and this was at the center of his method of analysis.

Another word for Renaissance Man is “polymath”. A polymath is a person who is an expert in a wide range of different subjects and areas of knowledge. Leonardo fit this description perfectly, not only did he draw the Mona Lisa, but he also worked as an engineer, for example coming up with a system of moveable barricades to protect the city of Venice, drew various very accurate maps, came up with many inventions (including specifications for a primitive tank and helicopter), and performed numerous scientific experiments. An important aspect of his work is that he kept very detailed notes and journals, which included many sketches of various ideas. What is interesting is that many of his writings were written in a mirror-script. This attempt at secrecy could hint at an internal fear that some people might steal his ideas. However he never left an explanation of why he used this mirror-script and so that will most likely forever remain a mystery. Twenty years after his death, the King of France said this about Leonardo: “There had

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never been another man born in the world who knew as much as Leonardo, not so much about painting, sculpture and architecture, as that he was a very great philosopher.“

Bringing Back Ideas From Antiquity

Renaissance humanism tried to bring back the knowledge passed down from Antiquity. The humanists of that era searched through libraries and read widely in order to try to find as much ancient knowledge as possible and try to learn from it. They then applied these ancient ideas to their own world. One of humanism's main tenets was that humans are limitless in their capacity for development. The Renaissance ideal was to try to embrace all knowledge and develop yourself as fully as possible. A man should be skilled in different areas: intellectual, artistic, social, physical.

There are some general prerequisites that a man has to fulfill in order to be able to function to his fullest potential in society. A man should be able to speak and write with eloquence, describe things clearly, and be persuasive. He should also be physically fit and have a deep knowledge of various subjects. Having all these abilities would result in the perfect gentleman who is able not only to talk about any subject, but also contribute to advancing several of these domains.

The idea was that the Renaissance Man ought to do all this with effortless ease. This was described in a book by Baldassare Castiglione called "The Book of the Courtier". In the book, he advances the notion of "sprezzatura", or doing things as if they took no effort. The courtier should be able to display "an easy facility in accomplishing difficult actions which hides the conscious effort that went into them." Modern movies try to show this easy nonchalance in their main characters all the time. Just think of all the movies where the hero does seemingly impossible things as if they were easy. The hero easily breaks into a high-security installation, runs effortlessly through the desert, dispatches ten enemies at the same time, constructs powerful bombs out of a soap on a rope and some sticks, or solves puzzles through powerful deductive skills.

A Renaissance Man has both a good mind and a healthy, strong body. Another Italian humanist who epitomized the Renaissance Man ideal was Leon Battista Alberti. He is known primarily as an architect, but he was a poet, linguist, philosopher and cryptographer. He designed and built many famous buildings around Italy, but also invented the first polyalphabetic cipher. What is remarkable is that while he was embarking on all these intellectual pursuits, he also did not neglect his body. Supposedly, he "excelled in all bodily exercises; could, with feet tied, leap over a standing man; could in the great cathedral, throw a coin far up to ring against the vault; amused himself by taming wild horses and climbing mountains.“

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The ideas on human capacity for self-development professed by these Renaissance scholars have a solid basis. Modern research also seems to confirm the Renaissance tenet that humans have an almost boundless capacity for development. The tenet is akin to the “growth mindset” described by some psychologists. Recent scientific research has discovered that the brain is not a static organ, but instead changes due to outside stimuli, which has been referred to as brain plasticity. This means a person can learn and improve themselves at any age.

The Abilities Of The Ideal Renaissance Man

A Renaissance Man strives for perfection, in mind, body and spirit. An iconic painting of the ideal man is the Vitruvian Man, painted by Leonardo da Vinci. The Vitruvian Man is based on the writings of an ancient Roman architect called Vitruvius. In his works, Vitruvius described the ideal proportions of the ideal man. Da Vinci took those writings and used them as a guide to draw the painting that today has become a visual synonym for the Renaissance Man.

A Renaissance Man tries to develop his capacities as fully as possible. He has a profound knowledge in several fields and deep expertise in some. It is important not to be just a dabbler, but also go more deeply in one or two specialized fields. The most important asset of a Renaissance Man is his broad base of knowledge, which he can combine to form different patterns. He can solve complex problems by examining them from different directions. He can bring analogies from one discipline to another one and also act as a bridge between different disciplines.

Having a wide knowledge base is a valuable commodity. A person won't know much if they just possess a few isolated facts. These facts need to be put in a wider perspective. It is facts and the context that they are found in and the different combinations of these that allow us to arrive at discovering how the world really works and then applying this knowledge in order to come up with new ideas and putting these ideas into practice. Charlie Munger, Vice-President of Berkshire-Hathaway, a close associate of Warren Buffett and one of the most talented investors in his own right put it this way: “You've got to have models in your head. And you've got to array your experience—both vicarious and direct—on this latticework of models. You may have noticed students who just try to remember and pound back what is remembered. Well, they fail in school and in life. You've got to hang experience on a latticework of models in your head.” You should have models in your head and compare these models with your experiences. It is not enough to just have a few models, but you need to have many of these models (from different fields), in order to be able to use them in different situations. For Munger, the models that he had in his head formed the basis of his investing strategy and made him one of the richest men in the world.

These models can serve as useful frameworks that you can apply at different times. You need

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to have multiple tools in order to solve problems, for as the saying goes: to a man with only a hammer, every problem looks like a nail. Having multiple tools at your disposal will make you a more versatile person, who is able to overcome different challenges and figure out new ways of doing things. Steve Jobs, probably one of the most well-known modern innovators shared his thoughts on what it takes to succeed: "Technology alone is not enough. It's technology married with the liberal arts, married with the humanities, that yields us the results that make our hearts sing."

What are the traits of a Renaissance Man?

A Renaissance Man uses both left-brain and right-brain type of thinking. He is:

1. curious
2. risk-taker
3. creative
4. has perseverance and self-discipline
5. has a thirst for knowledge and new experiences
6. excellence in physical, intellectual, artistic and social fields, which includes deep expertise in at least one field and is exceptional in other fields
7. most importantly, is always learning

How do you develop the capacities of a Renaissance Man?

Unfortunately, we live in an era of monomaths now. This means specialists. The problem with that is that people get stuck with one way of thinking, they have blinders on, and cannot see the big picture, including the relationships and similarities between different things.

That is why it is becoming more important than ever to embrace the ideals of the Renaissance and become a true Renaissance Man, a polymath. This will bring you a wider perspective on things and not only develop you as a man, but also give you the tools and abilities to succeed in whatever you attempt to do.

Deliberately put yourself in situations which will challenge you, give you new perspectives and teach you something new (for example traveling). In this way you will gain a wide variety of experiences, which you can learn from and apply later. You always need to be curious and work on improving yourself. The most important aspect of this is to always be learning new things. Never stop.

Take your first step on your lifelong journey to becoming a Renaissance Man: Step 1 in the Renaissance Man Project: Creating a Vision. In order to be able to chart the best possible path,

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you need to understand yourself: Personality Types: Why are you the way you are. The abilities that made Renaissance Men successful in the past are making a comeback and will become a very important path to success for many people in the future: Return of the expert-generalist and what you need to succeed in this world.

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