**Jakob Burckhardt  
Renaissance - Cultural history**

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| Jakob Burckhardt, later famous as a Renaissance Cultural historian, was born in Basel, where his father was a minister in the Reformed church, in May 1818. He himself embarked upon a theological course in 1837 but changed to historical studies being educated therein at the universities of Basel and Berlin (1839-43). Whilst at Berlin he attended lectures delivered by Leopold von Ranke. He also spent some of 1841 at Bonn where he was influenced by the Art Historian Franz Kugler.  With the exception of three years (1855-58), during which he taught at the Zürich Polytechnic Institute, he spent the following half century (1843-93) as lecturer and, (from 1858), as professor of the history of art and civilization at the University of Basel. It was in this later period that Burckhardt lost his faith but did not advertise this out of respect for his pious family.  Burckhardt is known to posterity as the father of cultural history. While earlier historians had concentrated on political and military history, Burckhardt discussed the total life of the people, including religion, art and literature. He wrote "And all things are sources - not only books, but the whole of life and every kind of spiritual manifestation." At the age of nineteen Burckhardt had made a trip to into the Italian peninsula and subsequently maintained that he had found there "a core of commitment around which his fantasies could crystalise." His later career as an historian was to reflect this early fascination with aspects of the history of the Italian peninsula.  Burckhardt's first important work was The Age of Constantine the Great (1852; trans. 1949), a study of the Roman Empire in the 4th century AD, in which he analyzed the decay of classical civilization and the triumph of Christianity.    "What was intended was not a history of the life and death of Constantine, nor yet an encyclopedia of all worth-while information pertaining to his period. Rather were the significant and essential characteristics of the contemporary world to be outlined and shaped into a perspicious view of the world."    Burckhardt's Age of Constantine was followed by The Cicerone: A Guide to the Works of Art in Italy (1855; trans. 1873), which became extremely popular, The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy (1860; trans. 1878), his most famous work, and the History of the Renaissance in Italy (1867).    It is The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy on which his reputation chiefly rests. In this work Burckhardt traced the cultural patterns of transition from the medieval period to the awakening of the modern spirit and creativity of the Renaissance. He saw the transition as one from a society in which people were primarily members of a class or community to a society that idealized the self-conscious individual. The term Renaissance suggesting a re-birth of individualistic accomplishment after a long intermission since the Classical Age. The term itself had been coined in this regard by the French historian Jules Michelet circa 1855-8.    A much quoted passage from The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy depicts a dramatic alteration in the outlook of many persons:-    "both sides of human consciousness - the side turned to the world and that turned inward - lay, as it were, beneath a common veil, dreaming or half awake. The veil was woven of faith, childlike prejudices, and illusion; seen through it, world and history appeared in strange hues; man recognized himself only as a member of a race, a nation, a party, a corporation, a family, or in some other general category. It was in Italy that this veil first melted into thin air, and awakened an **objective** perception and treatment of the state and all things of this world in general; but by its side, and with full power, there also arose the **subjective**; man becomes a self-aware individual and recognises himself as such."    At the time Burkhardt wrote The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy there was little in the way of accepted knowledge about what we today regard as "the Renaissance." His work was accepted as demonstrating that the shift from corporate medieval society to the modern spirit occurred in "Renaissance" Italy in the 14th and 15th century and, to a great extent, moulded the modern concept of the European Renaissance as a necessary and positive break with the outlook and society that preceded it.   Burckhardt's work remains one of the most important on the subject of the Renaissance. The Dutch historian Johan Huizinga called it, "that transcendent masterpiece." The first three parts of the book are held to be especially good - readable and interesting, profound and philosophical.    Whilst certain people flourished as individuals during the Renaissance and, in cases, were responsible for artistic, literary or scientific achievements that are recognised as representing advances in their fields it was often the case that other people were somewhat socially displaced by the advent of the new, individualistic, milieu and found it to be something they were effectively "compelled to endure."    The new tendency to cultivate an individualistic personality and to seek to achieve, as an individual, resulted in many kinds of self-expression some of them aggressive. It was in these times that the Italian peninsula featured a number of "tyrant rulers" and bands of often ill disciplined mercenary soldiers known as *condottieri* who participated in diverse local wars contested between the rulers of Italian states.    It often happened that an individuals desire to achieve greatness as a ruler or to become famous as a *condottieri* tended to disrupt the chances of a peaceful existence being enjoyed many other persons. Several historians had opportunity to record "striking and terrible" enterprises that were embarked upon because of a "burning desire to do something great and memorable."    Individuality reached its zenith, according to Burckhardt, in the Renaissance humanists, who turned their backs on Christianity, revered the ancients, and tried to live and write like the ancients.    Similarly in the visual arts for most of the next three hundred years, the great artistic personalities of the sixteenth centuries [Michelangelo, Leonardo, Raphael, Titian] loomed so large that their predecessors seemed to belong to a forgotten era. When they were finally rediscovered, people still acknowledged the high Renaissance as the turning point by referring to all painters before Raphael as 'the Primitives.'    Burckhardt established the thesis that Renaissance art represented a break with the past, wherein representation became scientific, realistic, individualistic and humane; the visual analogue to the birth of the modern sensibility, one which left behind the superstitious mindset of the Dark Ages. With qualifications, that thesis remains more or less the rule in the present, and is one reason that museums, such as the Uffizi in Florence, generally display works of art chronologically: so multitudes of students and aficionados can follow, with their own eyes, the elevation of art from its Gothic, one dimensional, iconic forms to its Renaissance, three dimensional, individualistic representations.    If qualified historians no longer speak of the Dark Ages, they still refer to the period before the fourteenth century as the Middle Ages or the Mediaeval Era - with most of the pejorative connotations of the Dark Ages still implied. They echo the writers and historians of the early Renaissance, of Dante and Petrarch and Alberti, who argued that the Renaissance generation broke with the superstitions of the past, recovered the best of the Classical world, and ushered in a new dawn of modernity.    Despite his interest in the dramatic, often extravagantly violent or sensual, Renaissance era Burckhardt himself lived a life of quiet routine in Basel. He refused many flattering invitations to take up academic appointments in other Universities and also declined invitations to give lectures. He showed no particular enthusiasm for the encouragements that were sometimes offered by family or friends that he enter into married life.  *"To each eye, perhaps, the outlines of a great civilization present a different picture. In the wide ocean upon which we venture, the possible ways and directions are many; and the same studies which have served for my work might easily, in other hands, not only receive a wholly different treatment and application, but lead to essentially different conclusions."*     Jacob Burckhardt retired from teaching in 1893 and died in Basel August 1897 |