

In the mid-1300s, the Black Death had reduced the population of Europe by one-third and brought the economy to a standstill. Italy recovered fairly quickly and was soon the center of the Renaissance and its creative upsurge. Only after 1450 did northern Europe enjoy the economic growth that had earlier supported the Renaissance in Italy.



**>> Analyze Information** Pieter Bruegel painted this scene of Flemish working life called *The Harvesters* in 1565. What are some Renaissance characteristics of this painting?



**Interactive Flipped Video**

## The Renaissance in Northern Europe

### Artists of the Northern Renaissance

The northern Renaissance began in the prosperous cities of **Flanders**, a region that included parts of what is today northern France, Belgium, and the Netherlands. Flanders was a thriving center of trade for northern Europe. From Flanders, the Renaissance spread to Spain, France, Germany, and England, which enjoyed cultural rebirths during the 1500s.

**Flemish Painters** Among the many talented artists of Flanders in the 1400s, Jan van Eyck stands out. His portrayals of townspeople as well as religious scenes abound in rich details that add to the realism of his art. Van Eyck developed new techniques for using oil paint. He and other Flemish artists used these new methods to produce strong colors and a hard-surfaced paint that could survive for centuries.

A leading Flemish painter of the 1500s was Pieter Bruegel (BROY gul). He used vibrant colors to portray lively scenes of peasant life, earning him the nickname "Peasant Bruegel." Although Bruegel produced works on religious and classical themes, his secular art

#### >> Objectives

**Describe** the themes that northern European artists, humanists, and writers explored.

**Explain** how the printing revolution shaped European society.

#### >> Key Terms

Johannes  
Gutenberg  
Flanders  
Albrecht Dürer  
engraving  
Erasmus  
Sir Thomas More  
utopian  
Shakespeare







>> This 1511 woodcut print by Albrecht Dürer is called *St. Christopher*.



>> Desiderius Erasmus was a Dutch priest and humanist scholar who was active during the Northern European Renaissance. He believed an individual's chief duties were to be open-minded and to show good will toward others.

influenced later Flemish artists, who painted scenes of ordinary people in their daily lives.

**Albrecht Dürer: A "German Leonardo"** Among the most influential artists of the northern Renaissance was the German painter and printmaker **Albrecht Dürer** (DYOOR ur). In 1494, he made the first of several trips to Italy to study the works and techniques of Italian masters. At home, he employed the new methods in his own paintings, engravings, and prints. Through these works as well as his essays, Dürer helped spread Renaissance ideas to northern Europe.

Dürer had a keen, inquiring mind. Because of his wide-ranging interests, which extended far beyond art, he is sometimes called the "German Leonardo."

Dürer is well-known for applying the painting techniques he had learned in Italy to **engraving**, a method of making prints from metal plates. In an engraving, an artist etches a design on a metal plate with acid. The artist then uses the plate to make prints. Many of Dürer's engravings and paintings portray religious upheaval of the time.

**? IDENTIFY** What were some important artistic themes in the Northern European Renaissance?

## Northern Renaissance Humanists and Writers

Like the Italian humanists, northern European humanist scholars stressed education and classical learning. At the same time, they emphasized religious themes. They believed that the revival of ancient learning should be used to bring about religious and moral reform.

Although most humanist scholars wrote mainly in Latin, other writers began to write in the vernacular, or everyday language of ordinary people. In this way, their works were accessible to the new middle class audience living in towns and cities.

**Erasmus** The great Dutch humanist Desiderius **Erasmus** (ih RAZ mus), became a priest in 1492. He used his knowledge of classical languages to produce a new Greek edition of the New Testament and a much-improved Latin translation of the Bible. At the same time, Erasmus called for a translation of the Bible into the vernacular.

"I disagree very much with those who are unwilling that Holy Scripture, translated into the vernacular, be read by the uneducated." For him, "the strength of the Christian religion" should not be based on people's



ignorance of it, but on their ability to study it on their own.

Erasmus used his pen to call for reforms in the Church. He challenged the worldliness of the Church and urged a return to early Christian traditions. His best-known work, *In Praise of Folly*, uses humor to explore the ignorant, immoral behavior of people. Erasmus taught that an individual's chief duties were to be open-minded and show good will toward others.

**Sir Thomas More** Erasmus's friend, the English humanist **Sir Thomas More**, also pressed for social and economic reforms. In *Utopia*, More describes an ideal society in which men and women live in peace and harmony. Private property does not exist. No one is idle, all are educated, and justice is used to end crime rather than to eliminate criminals. Today, the word **utopian** has come to describe any ideal society, with the implication that such a society is impractical.

**Rabelais's Comic Masterpiece** The French humanist François Rabelais (rab uh LAY) had a varied career as a monk, a physician, a Greek scholar, and an author. Unlike Erasmus and More, Rabelais wrote in the French vernacular. In *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, he chronicles the adventures of two gentle giants. On the surface, the novel is a comic tale of travel and war. But Rabelais uses his characters to offer opinions on religion, education, and other serious subjects.

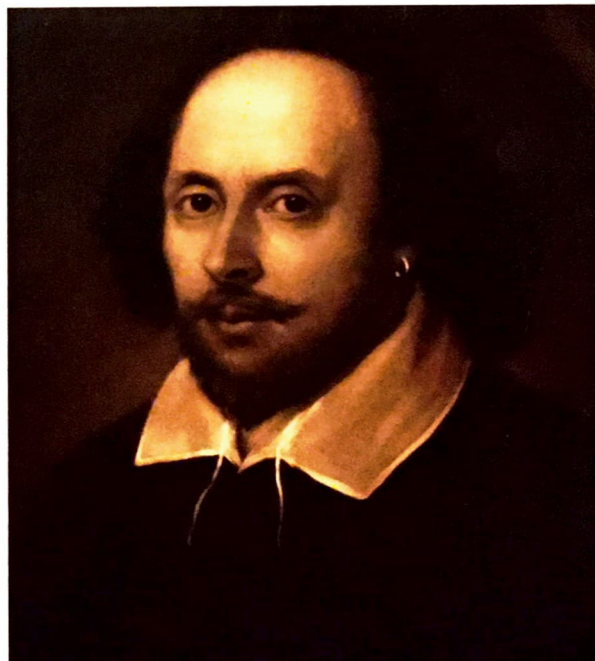
**Shakespeare Explores Universal Themes** The towering figure of Renaissance literature was the English poet and playwright **William Shakespeare**. Between 1590 and 1613, he wrote 37 plays that are still performed around the world. Shakespeare's genius was in expressing universal themes in everyday realistic settings. His work explores Renaissance ideals such as the complexity of the individual and the importance of the classics.

At the same time, his characters speak in language that common people can understand and appreciate. Shakespeare's comedies, such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, laugh at the follies and joys of young people in love. His history plays, such as *Richard III*, chronicle the power struggles of English kings. His tragedies show human beings crushed by powerful forces or their own weakness. In *Romeo and Juliet*, two teenagers fall victim to an old family feud, while *Macbeth* depicts an ambitious couple whose desire for political power leads them to murder.

Shakespeare's love of words vastly enriched the English language. More than 1,700 words appeared for



**>> Draw Conclusions** Boats sit in front of the island Utopia, from More's 1516 book *Utopia*. On the island, "...men and women of all ranks, go to hear lectures of one sort or other." More advocated for an education system available to all.



**>> William Shakespeare (1564–1616)**, English author, playwright, and poet

 **Interactive Gallery**



the first time in his works, including *bedroom*, *lonely*, *generous*, *gloomy*, *heartsick*, *hurry*, and *sneak*.

**? COMPARE** What Renaissance themes are explored in Shakespeare's works?

## The Printing Revolution

The great works of Renaissance literature reached a large audience. The reason for this was a crucial breakthrough in technology—the development of printing in Europe.

**The New Technology** In 1456, **Johannes Gutenberg** (GOOT un burg) of Mainz, Germany, printed a complete edition of the Christian Bible using a printing press with movable metal type. With the Gutenberg Bible, the European age of printing had begun. Within a few years, printing presses using Gutenberg's technology sprang up in Italy, Germany, the Netherlands, and England.

The development of printing set off revolutionary changes that would transform Europe. Before the printing press, there had been only a few thousand books in all of Europe. These books had been slowly copied out by hand. By 1500, according to some estimates, 15 to 20 million volumes had been produced

on new printing presses. In the next century, between 150 and 200 million books went into circulation.

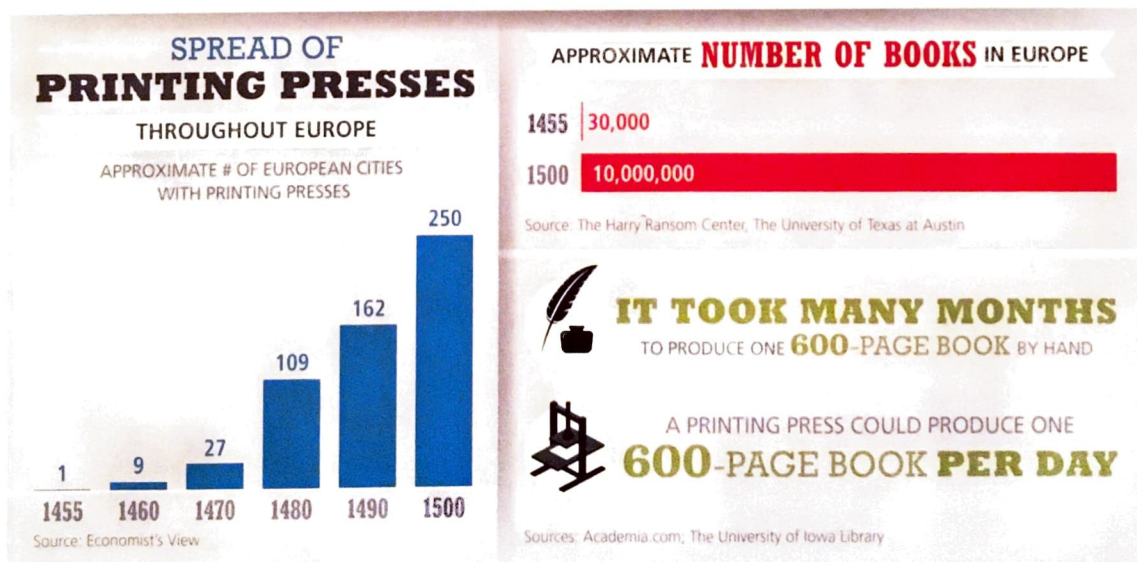
**The Impact of the Printed Book** The printing revolution ushered in a new era of mass production of books. It also affected the price of books. Books printed with movable type on rag paper were easier to produce and cheaper than hand-copied works. As books became readily available, more people learned to read and write. They thus gained access to a broad range of knowledge as presses churned out books on topics from medicine and law to astrology, mining, and geography.

Printing influenced both religious and secular, or nonreligious, thought. "The preaching of sermons is speaking to a few of mankind," noted an English author, "but printing books is talking to the whole world." With printed books, educated Europeans were exposed to new ideas that greatly expanded their horizons.

The new printing presses contributed to the religious turmoil that engulfed Europe in the 1500s. By then, many Christians could read the Bible for themselves. As a result, the ideas of religious reformers spread faster and to a larger audience than ever before.

**? CHECK UNDERSTANDING** Why was it hard for the general population to access books before the printing press?

## EFFECTS OF THE PRINTING PRESS



**>> Analyze Charts** The chart shows the effects of the printing press in Europe. Is it likely or unlikely that in 1500, only the largest European capital cities had printing presses?