Family Life During the Renaissance

Roles of men, women, and children in the European Renaissance

Apr 29, 2007 Lorri Brown

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Family Roles

Renaissance women, as expected, stayed home to care for the children and the home. The men in the family worked out of the house, tending the fields or in merchant shops. Older children, both boys and girls, often worked alongside their fathers, to help contribute to the family funds.

Renaissance Housing

Houses were small, some with no more than two rooms with low ceilings. It would not be considered unusual for a family of four to share a single bed. Fireplaces were used for cooking, causing the tiny house to quickly fill with smoke. In the hot summer months, houses in southern Europe would be unbearably hot, causing women to set up their looms outdoors, and serve family meals outdoors as well.

Household possessions were simple, to say the least. A typical Renaissance family owned two outfits and one pair of shoes per person, some kitchen utensils, the aforementioned bed, a chamber pot, a table and bench, a chest, and a few tools.

Childhood

Children during the Renaissance were thought to be miniature adults, and therefore, as soon as they were out of nappies they would be dressed like adults, and spoken to as adults. Despite this grown-up treatment, children still had childhood toys and games to keep them occupied until they were deemed old enough to work, at around age seven or eight.

Toddlers were often confined to a wooden walker, to prevent them from wandering off, or tied to something with a long rope. This was important because a typical Renaissance house was full of burning fires, pots of boiling liquid.

Boys stayed home with their mother until about the age of seven. Then they may go to a private school, or be tutored, if the family could afford it. If they came from a poor family boys would be sent to work as a servant in a wealthy household. At age fourteen boys could enter into an apprenticeship.
Girls stayed home with their mothers, learning the necessary skills to run a household. If their family was poor, then the girls may be put to work as domestic servants in wealthy households. A female was considered a “girl” until she married. If a woman never married, she was never considered fully grown. Wealthier girls received a limited education, focusing on history, Latin, and geography, and the skills needed to be a good wife. Few women received an education equal to that of males.

Interest in the European Renaissance continues to fascinate people. It was a time of huge social, economic and intellectual growth in Europe. All of these changes are reflected to some degree through the social customs of the time. Historical costumes, daily life, even the foods people ate, were a reflection of the changing times.

**Life in The Renaissance: Courtship and Families**

Renaissance courtship, betrothal and weddings were unique during the European Renaissance. The main goal of a Renaissance marriage was to produce children.

The very rich (nobles and royalty) generally married to better their family’s social standing, and increase the family’s coffers. Everyone else, from merchants to peasants, usually married for love, or at least compatibility.

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**Life in The Renaissance: Fashions and Accessories**

The Sixteenth Century (1500s) was a time of great change for women’s Renaissance fashion. While Renaissance fashion tends varied in different countries (just like today’s fashion trends) there are some commonalities between all areas of Western Europe. Renaissance women's clothing is defined by regions and time periods. The historical costumes of Western Europe during the Renaissance are beautiful and richly detailed. Fashion accessories of the Sixteenth Century were almost as important as the clothing itself. Hoods, ruffs, wigs and cosmetics all came onto the scene during the 1500s.

**Life in The Renaissance: Table Manners**

By today’s standards, Renaissance table manners were somewhat...lacking, to say the least. As in Medieval times, diners shared communal dishes, digging in (literally) with their hands. There were no serving utensils, and no silverware. What we think of as “fine manners” (eating with a fork, no burping at the table) did not become fashionable until the
1600s. Those who did exert some type of dining etiquette could expect to be labeled a pretentious snob.

**Life in The Renaissance: Popular Foods**

Early Renaissance foods were largely left over from the Middle Ages, until the discovery of the Americas in 1492 by Christopher Columbus. Soon new foods began trickling into Renaissance kitchens, beginning with the nobility and eventually finding its way into the homes of merchants, farmers and peasant. Certain crops, like the potato and corn, revolutionized European farming. Other foods, such as the tomato, were viewed with suspicion, even fear, and were not eaten on a regular basis for another two centuries!

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