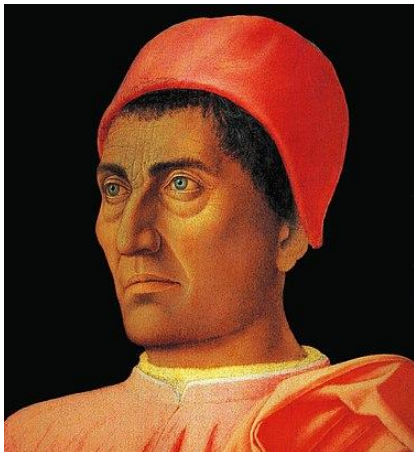


“Minorities” in the Renaissance: Learning about Africans, Women & Jews During Europe’s Rebirth

The Renaissance mostly focuses on the contributions and advancements made by educated white elite Christian men. They are the ones who tended to be educated, ran guilds, governments and the church. Yet there were what we might classify as “minorities” others who lived and contributed in different ways to life during The Renaissance. They included women, Africans, servants and Jews. This lesson includes paintings and links to additional readings to expose students to those “others” of the Renaissance period who lived, worked with and often served the leaders and main contributors of Europe’s rebirth.



This is a portrait of Alessandro de' Medici by Agnolo Bronzino, 1553.



This is a portrait of Carlo de' Medici by Andrea Mantegna, 1466

What do you notice about Alessandro and Carlo de' Medici? Can you guess their ethnicity?

Answer (teachers can use for discussion or to reveal information):

Alessandro de' Medici was declared to be the only son of Lorenzo II de' Medici. However, some now believe he was the illegitimate son of Cardinal Giulio de' Medici, who became Pope Clement, and an African slave of his. Alessandro was nicknamed "the Moor" due to his dark complexion. He spent his early childhood in Rome receiving a humanist education. In 1536, he was married to Margaret of Austria (also known as Margaret of Parma), the illegitimate daughter of Holy Roman Emperor Charles V and Johanna Maria van der Gheynst. Alessandro ruled Florence from 1530 to 1537.

- Why would both men be so accepted as a member of the Medici family?
- Were they more likely to be accepted since their father was a Medici?
- Was the fact that they were of mixed a potential benefit in that time?

Carlo de' Medici was the illegitimate son of Cosimo de' Medici and a slave woman named Maddalena, who was said to have been purchased in Venice. Born in 1428 or 1430, Carlo was forced to enter the religious life, becoming an abbot and papal tax collector.

Additional Resources:

[The Forgotten History of Florence's Mixed-Race Medici](#) by Catherine Fletcher

[The Black Prince of Florence: The Spectacular Life and Treacherous World of Alessandro de' Medici](#) by Catherine Fletcher

Slaves in Renaissance Europe

Before European exploration of Africa in the late 14th century, slaves in Europe were brought from the eastern Mediterranean, Russia, or central Asia. With increased trade relations in the 15th century, slaves came increasingly from Africa. Slavery in Renaissance Europe differed from its later counterpart in the Americas.

Slaves in urban settings often worked within a home or small business. They had access to only minimal education and were barred from highly skilled trades. However, they worked in a variety of professions, as bakers, poultry sellers, and blanket makers among other things. Upon their master's death, slaves were set free with provisions to begin a new life. Free Africans in Europe became surgeons, lawyers, teachers, and writers.

Source: [Africans in Renaissance Europe - The Ultimate History Project](#)



This painting *The Procession of the Magi* by Benozzo Gozzoli shows the Medici family processing to meet baby Jesus on the Epiphany. It was created for the Medici family chapel inside their palace in Florence.

Notice the unknown, well dressed black man on the left, just below Cosimo de' Medici.

- Is he a slave?
- If so, does he appear to be well treated and taken care of?
- What might this reveal about slaves in Europe v. slaves in the Americas?
- If he was a servant or slave to the Medici, why might he have been included in this painting?

Women in the Renaissance



This painting is of Battista Sforza, Duchess of Urbino by Piero della Francesca, c. 1473.

Battista Sforza was a humanist educated woman who married Duke Federico da Montefeltro of Urbino. The Sforza family had a tradition of educating female family members. She was just 14 when she became the duke's 2nd wife in 1460 (he was also 24 years older than her). While her husband was away fighting in wars, Battista served as regent of Urbino. She gave the duke seven children, the last one being a male who became the heir. Battista died in 1472, three months after the birth of Guidobaldo.

Questions:

Why might the Sforza's have had a tradition of educating women in their family?

Did some humanists believe women should be educated and knowledgeable about different subjects? (Could mention/include *The Book of the Courtier*)

Additional Readings:

["The Quality of Women's Intelligence': Female Humanists in Renaissance Italy"](#)

[A Woman is Wise: The Influence of Civic and Christian Humanism on the Education of Women in Northern Italy and England During the Renaissance](#)

[Ippolita Maria Sforza: The Renaissance Princess Who Linked Milan and Naples](#)

[Was there a Women's Renaissance?](#)

Christine de Pisan

Excerpt from *The Treasure of the City of Ladies*, 1405

“All wives of husbands should be very painstaking and diligent if they wish to have the necessities of life. They should encourage their husbands or their workmen to get to work early in the morning and work until late... [And] the wife herself should [also] be involved in the work to the extent that she knows all about it, so that she may know how to oversee his workers, if her husband is absent, and to reprove them if they do not do well... And when customers come to her husband and try to drive a hard bargain, she ought to warn him solicitously to take care that he does not make a bad deal.”

“It is said that three things drive a man from his home: a quarrelsome wife, a smoking fireplace, and a leaking roof. She too ought to stay at home gladly and not go off every day traipsing hither and yon gossiping with the neighbors and visiting her chums to find out what everyone is doing. That is done by slovenly housewives roaming about the town in groups. Nor should she go off on these pilgrimages got up for no good reason and involving a lot of needless expense.”



Illumination from *The Book of the City of Ladies*. Christine de Pisan is shown before the personifications of Rectitude, Reason, and Justice in her study, and working alongside Justice to build the 'City of Ladies.'

Christine de Pisan was a poet and author who worked at the court of King Charles VI of France and several French dukes. She was born in Venice, Italy in 1364. She moved to Paris in 1368 and married Etienne du Castel, a notary and royal secretary. Her husband died of the plague in 1389 and she was left as a single mother to raise her 3 children. Christine turned to writing and became a fervent French nationalist. Drawing on her own life experiences, she advised women on how to navigate early fifteenth century society in France. Christine believed reason, rectitude and justice were the three most important virtues for a woman's success. She wrote 41 pieces of poetry and prose, becoming well known as the first professional female writer in Europe.

Questions:

- What is remarkable about Pisan's words and insights?
- What did she believe the role of the wife was? Has this changed over time?
- Why were women typically not writing books during the Renaissance?
- Why might French nobles and royal family members have patronized Pisan?
- Does any of what she writes still resonate in today's world?

Jews in the Renaissance

In the spring of 1492, shortly after the Moors were driven out of Granada, Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain expelled all the Jews from their lands and thus, by a stroke of the pen, put an end to the largest and most distinguished Jewish settlement in Europe. The expulsion of this intelligent, cultured, and industrious class was prompted only in part by the greed of the king and the intensified nationalism of the people who had just brought the crusade against the Muslim Moors to a glorious close. The real motive was the religious zeal of the Church, the Queen, and the masses. The official reason given for driving out the Jews was that they encouraged the Marranos (a Christianized Moor or Jew) to persist in their Jewishness and thus would not allow them to become good Christians.

The following account gives a detailed and accurate picture of the expulsion and its immediate consequences for Spanish Jewry. It was written in Hebrew by an Italian Jew in April or May, 1495.

And in the year 5252 [1492], in the days of King Ferdinand, the Lord visited the remnant of his people a second time [the first Spanish visitation was in 1391], and exiled them. After the King had captured the city of Granada from the Moors, and it had surrendered to him on the 7th of January of the year just mentioned, he ordered the expulsion of all the Jews in all parts of his kingdom: in the kingdoms of Castile, Catalonia, Aragon, Galicia, Majorca, Minorca, the Basque provinces, the islands of Sardinia and Sicily, and the kingdom of Valencia. Even before that the Queen had expelled them from the kingdom of Andalusia [1483].

The King gave them three months' time in which to leave. It was announced in public in every city on the first of May, which happened to be the 19th day of the *Omer*; and the term ended on the day before the 9th of Ab. [The forty-nine days between the second of Passover and *Shabuot* are called *Omer* days. The actual decree of expulsion was signed March 31 and announced the first of May, the 19th day of the *Omer*. The Jews were to leave during May, June, and July and be out of the country by August 1, the 8th of Ab.]

About their number there is no agreement, but, after many inquiries, I found that the most generally accepted estimate is 50,000 families, or, as others say, 53,000 [This would be about 250,000 persons. Other estimates run from 100,000 to 800,000.] They had houses, fields, vineyards, and cattle, and most of them were artisans. At that time there existed many [Talmudic] academies in Spain..”

When the edict of expulsion became known in the other countries, vessels came from Genoa to the Spanish harbors to carry away the Jews. The crews of these vessels, too, acted maliciously and meanly toward the Jews, robbed them, and delivered some of them to the famous pirate of that time who was called the Corsair of Genoa. To those who escaped and arrived at Genoa the people of the city showed themselves merciless, and oppressed and robbed them, and the cruelty of their wicked hearts went so far that they took the infants from the mothers' breasts.

Many ships with Jews, especially from Sicily, went to the city of Naples on the coast. The King of this country was friendly to the Jews, received them all, and was merciful towards them, and he helped them with money. The Jews that were at Naples supplied them with food as much as they could, and sent around to the other parts of Italy to collect money to sustain them. The Marranos in this city lent them money on pledges without interest; even the Dominican Brotherhood acted mercifully toward them. [The Dominican monks were normally bitterly opposed to Jews.] On account of their very large number, all this was not enough. Some of them died by famine, others sold their children to Christians to sustain their life. Finally, a plague broke out among them, spread to Naples, and very many of them died, so that the living wearied of burying the dead.

Part of the exiled Spaniards went over sea to Turkey. Some of them were thrown into the sea and drowned, but those who arrived, there the King of Turkey received kindly, as they were artisans. He lent them money and settled many of them on an island, and gave them fields and estates. [The Turks needed smiths and makers of munitions for the war against Christian Europe.]



Representation of the massacre of Jews in Lisbon, 1506.

On April 19, 1506, a crowd of Catholics and foreign sailors in Lisbon, Portugal tortured, killed and burnt at the stake hundreds of people who were accused of being Jews. This was 30 years before the establishment of the Portuguese Inquisition. New Christians (converted Jews) became scapegoats in Lisbon for drought, famine and plague that was impacting the city. More than 500 people were killed in what is known as the Lisbon massacre or Lisbon pogrom.

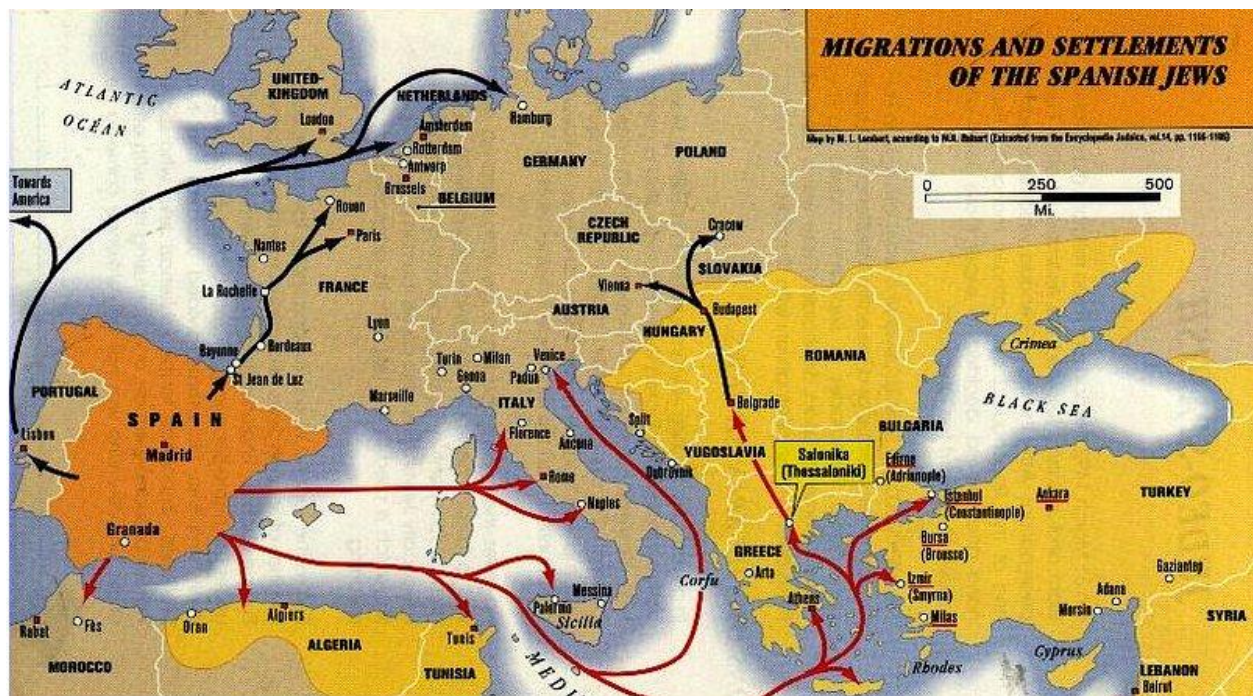
Questions:

- What is meant by “religious zeal” and why did this lead to the expulsion of Jews from Spain?
- How does this account relate to what we know from other periods in history when Jews were discriminated against or killed?

- How might the expulsion of the Jews have impacted Spain's economy, national identity and culture?
- Could this event have been the beginnings of modern anti-Semitism?
- Why might New Christians in Portugal be blamed for problems occurring there?

Lesson Plan on Tolerance and Intolerance

This lesson connects with [Cities of Light: The Rise and Fall of Islamic Spain](#) documentary. It focuses on the issue of religious tolerance and intolerance in Spain in the late fifteenth century. You can access the entire documentary or clips in the above link. Other resources and lessons are available at: <https://www.islamicspain.tv/>.



Websites & Articles that may be of interest:

1594: A Queen's Doctor is executed for treason - The secret Jew Dr. Rodrigo Lopez was convicted for conspiring to poison Queen Elizabeth I

The Jews and the Renaissance

Renaissance Revealed: The Oppression of Jews in Italy in the 1500s

The Amsterdam Rabbi who became the most famous Jew in the World