

Renaissance men: cellini and pitti essay sample



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In his essay "The Development of the Individual," Jacob Burckhardt analyzes the dramatic transformation of thought that distinguishes the Renaissance philosophy of self-perception from that of the Medieval man. Central to Burckhardt's thesis is the idea that Italy became the epicenter of this tide of intellectual rebirth because its fragmented political system allowed its citizenry to understand themselves in terms of their personal identities, rather than merely as insignificant parts of a larger group, as had been the case in the Middle Ages.

With the freedom to explore and express his individuality, the Renaissance man reached new heights of personal and intellectual development. It was thus the Renaissance man's supreme appreciation and application of his own unique characteristics and talents that set him apart from his Medieval counterparts. According to Burckhardt, it is this attitude that formed the foundation for humanism, the intellectual spirit that fueled the great advances of the Renaissance.

If it can be argued that humanism and the individualist spirit defined the Renaissance, then it must be agreed that the memoirs of Buonaccorso Pitti and Benvenuto Cellini testify to their authors' having earned the title of Renaissance men. Separated by time, plot, and style, the autobiographies of the two Florentine natives show few ostensible similarities and tell two very different stories, but are nevertheless connected by one key factor: both offer profound insights into the intellectual and psychological development of their respective authors and reflect the prevalence of humanist influences in their author's lives.

Through their autobiographies, Buonaccorso Pitti and Benvenuto Cellini, although unique in their aspirations and achievements, display the traits by which Burckhardt defines the *uomo universale*. Proud, ambitious, headstrong, and keenly aware of themselves not only as individuals, but also in terms of their interactions with others and with respect to their distinct contributions to society, Pitti and Cellini correspond with Burckhardt's model for the Renaissance man. The facet of both memoirs that most clearly identifies the texts as belonging to the humanist tradition is the authors' purposes for writing them.

Buonaccorso Pitti, a Florentine entrepreneur turned diplomat, began his memoir near the end of his career in 1412, arguably for the express purpose of preserving his family's legacy for future generations. Although the notion of legacy, a characteristically Renaissance ideal, marks Pitti as a forward-thinking man for his time, what especially suggests Pitti's humanist tendencies is his implicit perception that his life is extraordinary and people will benefit from reading about it.

To an even greater degree than Pitti, Benvenuto Cellini likewise fancied himself an exceptional character, and cites as his reason for writing his belief that "all men of any condition who have done something of special worth... should write in their own hands the story of their lives" (Cellini, 5). With respect to legacy Cellini completely surpasses Pitti's modest preservationist goals and uses his memoir as a vehicle to proliferate his fame and turn a profit. Cellini's autobiography, with its exploits ranging from bawdy to violent to heroic in nature, was clearly written to be entertaining to a public audience.

As such, the text exudes an almost fictional quality and suggests that an important shift has taken place in Florentine society since Pitti wrote his memoir over a century beforehand - namely the establishment of a consumer audience for pleasure books. With a pervasive sense of individualism and pride underlying their motivations for writing, Pitti and Cellini continue to follow the humanist tradition, presenting their memoirs so as to highlight their remarkable successes in life.

An essential facet of the Renaissance man that can be seen in both Pitti and Cellini is the desire to achieve power and influence, and both authors succeeded at these aims largely as a result of their incredible social connections. It is here that Burckhardt's description of the relationship between the Renaissance man and the despot rings especially true. Throughout his diary, Buonaccorso Pitti engages consistently in namedropping and places a great deal of emphasis on describing his dealings with the various royal courts he visited.

Pitti, in the fashion of Burckhardt's Renaissance man, maximized his power by ingratiating himself with as many influential people as possible, ultimately attaining prestige on an international level. One episode that suggests the extent of Pitti's social prominence is his description of how the Duke of Milan sent all of his personal physicians to care for him when he was injured in Pavia (Brucker, 48).

As Pitti later recounts the story of how, after having become embroiled in a feud with the Viscount de Monlev, the King of France took his side and the Duke of Orleans swore to protect him, it is clear that Pitti's close personal

relationships with members of the European aristocracy afforded him a measure of power and influence within the structure of international politics, thus increasing his efficacy as a diplomat (Brucker, 52).

Pitti's anecdote about "saving the life" of the Holy Roman Emperor by warning him of the Duke of Milan's assassination plot further illustrates the magnitude of his involvement in the political and personal lives of Europe's elite (Brucker, 68). Like Pitti, Cellini devotes a large portion of his memoir to chronicling his dealings with the power players of his era, but places a much greater emphasis on self-aggrandizement. Cellini's arrogance is evident as he remarks that he "went away half content" when Pope Clement affectionately identified him as "the greatest man who was ever born into his profession" (Cellini, 100).

Later in his career, Cellini claims that he was so much in favor with King Francis I that the king sent a small military force to oust a powerful noble from his castle because Cellini had taken a fancy to it and wanted to use the property as a residence and workshop (Cellini, 244). Francis's appreciation for Cellini's work continued to blossom and he eventually presented the artist with an unsolicited gift of naturalization papers, "a far greater honor than to be made a Venetian nobleman," the king's messengers explained to the indifferent Cellini (Cellini, 253).

Cellini ultimately developed such an intimate relationship with the monarch that Francis would often address him as "mon ami," an almost unheard-of courtesy for royalty to extend to a commoner (Cellini, 288). Pitti's relationship with the French royal family, although remarkable for his era,

pales in comparison to the level of intimacy that Cellini and Francis I shared. In addition to glorifying his artistic achievements and prominent social connections, Cellini steps beyond the strict factual accounts seen in Pitti's memoir, choosing to spice up his autobiography by shamelessly promoting his own heroism and machismo.

Cellini's description of how he performed "daring deeds" in the defense of Rome during the Spanish attack of 1527 is stirring, but, like all of his fantastic works, it is likely that this story is largely a product of Cellini's vivid imagination and creative discretion (Cellini, 66). The artist's narrative references to his unabashedly scandalous love affairs outstrip Pitti's modest avowals of courtly love and lend intrigue to a story otherwise scattered with anecdotes of temperamental rage and rash violence, the products of a hot temper befitting a man with a Renaissance ego.

On the occasion of his brother's murder, Cellini's rage reached homicidal proportions as he set out to avenge his brother's honor by slaughtering his brother's assailant. Violent incidents, even those less severe than this one, often forced Cellini to flee from the consequences of his actions, but as a citizen of the world with talents and social connections galore, he had little trouble making himself at home wherever he roamed.

With the quote "Wherever the learned man fixes his seat, there is home," Burckhardt describes the notion of cosmopolitanism, a theme central to the lives of both Pitti and Cellini. Although proud of the Florentine heritage, Pitti and Cellini did not hesitate to engage their cosmopolitan curiosities, abandoning Florence to seek their destinies elsewhere. "Eager to see

something of the world," Pitti left home at the age of twenty-two and began his career modestly as a wayward gambler and speculative entrepreneur (Brucker, 24).

In the decades that followed, he traveled across Europe, becoming a familiar face at several European royal courts and eventually achieving various government and diplomatic posts across the Italian peninsula. Pitti's description of his large and influential circle of friends and the incredible variety of places he visited is striking: this was a man who never met a stranger. Cellini, partly as a result of his banishment from Florence at the age of fifteen, was also able to indulge his cosmopolitan yearnings early in his career.

Under the apprenticeship of Francesco Castoro during his exile to Siena, Cellini was first able to fully explore his passion for goldsmithing (Cellini, 14). Despite being recalled to Florence at his father's behest, Cellini chose, for the rest of his career, to seek education and employment in a variety of cities across the European continent. The artist worked from his castle in France for most of his later career and divided his time between fulfilling commissions for the French royal family and creating special works for high-ranking church officials and aristocrats throughout Italy.

Benvenuto Cellini's tale of banishment from Florence exemplifies Burckhardt's explanation of how the cosmopolitan spirit enables the complete man to rise above his peripheral circumstances and capitalize fully upon his talents. For any other young man, banishment from home at such a tender age might have proved catastrophic to his course of personal

development. Cellini, however, blessed with an exceptionally resolute character and an adventurous spirit, benefited greatly from this turn of events.

Had the young artist instead remained in Florence under his father's tutelage, he might have been persuaded to follow his father's wishes and become a professional musician. Away from his father's influence, however, Cellini found himself free to act upon his own desires and develop his preferred talents. Buonaccorso Pitti, although never the subject of a formal exile, follows Burckhardt's model of cosmopolitanism similarly. At home in Florence, Pitti and his brothers were saddled with the responsibility of heading their family's large household.

Upon leaving Florence soon after his father's death in 1374, Buonaccorso became enamored with living abroad. Throughout his career Pitti traveled constantly, only residing in his native Florence intermittently. Continuously faced with new people and situations, Pitti adapted to his surroundings skillfully, made important connections in the international community, and developed his persona independent of the rules and expectations of Florentine social hierarchy.

Although lacking in Cellini's obvious artistic talents, Pitti capitalized on his particular set of skills with comparable efficacy, using his charisma and aptitude for business to work his way to the top through a series of prominent social alliances, convenient marriages, and profitable financial ventures. Although remarkably skilled at ingratiating themselves with the

upper eshelon of society Pitti and Cellini were not simply lackeys for their aristocratic patrons.

Both autobiographies are laced with stories of defiance and conflict, suggesting that the authors also possessed strong senses of self-will and were disposed to challenge authority for the sake of their own interests. Pitti exhibits this trait as he recounts a tale of becoming embroiled in a major legal battle after challenging influential church officials to stand up for a falsely accused friend.

After having to pay a large fine and closely escaping arrest, Pitti instructs his readers to avoid dealings with the Catholic Church and to consider the story a warning of “ what happens when one tries, no matter how rightfully, to resist those mightier than oneself” (Brucker, 88). In contrast to Pitti’s ultimately acquiescent attitude, Cellini’s ego compels him to defy authority, even in the face of severe consequences. Cellini’s audacity is well illustrated by his behavior during the ordeal over Pope Clement’s chalice.

A fickle and perfectionistic craftsman, Cellini envisioned the chalice as a grand work of art and insisted on taking his time finishing it. When Pope Clement grew tired of waiting and sent his officials to collect the unfinished chalice and transfer it to another artist for completion, Cellini became deeply offended and agreed only to refund the value of the materials, adamantly refusing to part with his beloved creation.

Despite threats of imprisonment and execution, the artist continued to resist the authorities proclaiming, “ the work is mine, I shall do with it as I wish! ” (Cellini, 104). Cellini’s understanding of his work as physical and emotional

extension of his artistic spirit underscores the artist's defining qualities of pride and egotism.

In the model of Burckhardt's *uomo universale*, Cellini and Pitti were both individuals who sought the highest level of personal development, transcending national and cultural boundaries through the mastery and application of their talents. Although Burckhardt's definition of the Renaissance man suggests the achievement of perfection in life's various pursuits, is not necessarily the actual achievement of greatness, but the individual's desire to achieve greatness that defines the "all-sided man."

Notwithstanding their shortcomings and failures, Pitti and Cellini, in their own exceptional ways and to varying degrees, achieved incredible successes in their personal and professional lives. Even as such, their illustrious careers alone offer only incomplete testimony to their humanist tendencies and Renaissance spirits. Ultimately, Buonaccorso Pitti and Benvenuto Cellini distinguish themselves as Renaissance men through their remarkable individuality, their extraordinary level of ambition, and their unyielding work ethic.