

Jerry Brotton

# THE RENAISSANCE

A Very Short Introduction

Burckhardt had implied in his celebration of 'modern' man: they were fluid and contingent.

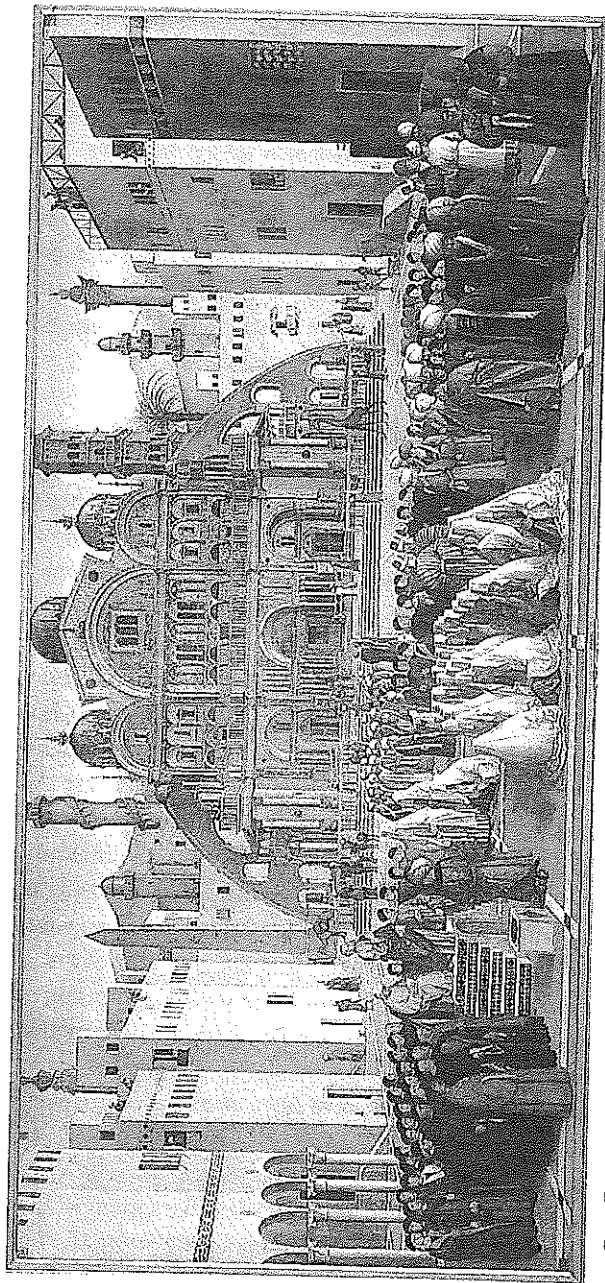
The legacy of the Renaissance in the 21st century remains as contested as ever. Since the attacks on the USA in September 2001, the rhetoric of the clash of civilizations between east and west has taken its lead from the assumption that the Renaissance represented the global triumph of the superior values of western humanity. However, as we will see in the next chapter, the origins of the Renaissance were far more culturally mixed than these claims would suggest, and its impact spread far beyond the shores of Europe.

## Chapter 1

### A global Renaissance

One of the problems with the classic definitions of the Renaissance proposed is that they celebrate the achievements of European civilization to the exclusion of all others. It is no coincidence that the period that witnessed the invention of the term was also the moment at which Europe was most aggressively asserting its imperial dominance across the globe. In recent years, alternative approaches to the Renaissance from history, economics, and anthropology have complicated this picture, and offered alternative factors crucial to understanding the Renaissance, but which were dismissed by 19th-century thinkers like Michelet and Burckhardt as irrelevant. This chapter situates the Renaissance within the wider international world. It argues that trade, finance, commodities, patronage, imperial conflict, and the exchange with different cultures were all key elements of the Renaissance. Focusing on these issues offers a different understanding of what shaped the Renaissance. It also leads us to think of the creativity of the Renaissance as not confined to painting, writing, sculpture, and architecture. Other artefacts such as ceramics, textiles, metalwork, and furniture also shaped people's beliefs and attitudes, even though many of these objects have since been neglected, destroyed, or lost.

Another famous Renaissance painting that raises many of these issues is Gentile and Giovanni Bellini's painting *Saint Mark*



2. Gentile and Giovanni Bellini's *Saint Mark Preaching in Alexandria* (1504-7) captures Europe's fascination with the culture, architecture, and communities of the east.

*Preaching in Alexandria*, the centrepiece of the Pinacoteca di Brera Renaissance collection in Milan. The Bellini painting depicts St Mark, the founder of the Christian Church in Alexandria, where he was martyred around AD 75, and patron saint of Venice. In the painting Mark stands in a pulpit, preaching to a group of oriental women swathed in white mantles. Behind Mark stands a group of Venetian noblemen, while in front of the saint is an extraordinary array of oriental figures that mingle easily with more Europeans. They include Egyptian Mamluks, North African 'Moors', Ottomans, Persians, Ethiopians, and Tartars.

The drama of the action takes place in the bottom third of the painting; the rest of the canvas is dominated by the dramatic landscape of Alexandria. A domed Byzantine basilica, an imaginative recreation of St Mark's Alexandrian church, dominates the backdrop. In the piazza Oriental figures converse, some on horseback, others leading camels and a giraffe. The houses that face onto the square are adorned with Egyptian grilles and tiles. Islamic carpets and rugs hang from the windows. The minarets, columns, and pillars that make up the skyline are a mixture of Alexandrian landmarks and the Bellinis' own invention. The basilica is an eclectic mixture of elements of the Church of San Marco in Venice and Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, while the towers and columns in the distance correspond to some of Alexandria's most famous landmarks, many of which had already been emulated in the architecture of Venice itself.

At first the painting appears to be a pious image of the Christian martyr preaching to a group of 'unbelievers', drawing on the classical world so precious to Renaissance thinkers and artists. However, this only tells one side of the story. Although Mark is dressed as an ancient Roman, in keeping with his life in 1st-century Alexandria, the garments of the audience are recognizably late 15th century, as are the surrounding buildings. The Bellinis depict the intermingling of communities and cultures in a scene that evokes both the western church and the eastern marketplace. The painting

is a combination of two worlds: the contemporary and the classical. At the same time as evoking the world of 1st-century Alexandria and the life of St Mark, the artists are also keen to portray Venice's relationship with contemporary, late 15th-century Alexandria. Commissioned to paint a story of the history of Venice's patron saint, they depict St Mark in a contemporary setting that would have been recognizable to many wealthy and influential Venetians. This is a familiar feature of Renaissance art and literature: dressing the contemporary world up in the clothes of the past as a way of understanding the present.

## West meets east

The Bellinis were fascinated by both the myths and the reality of the world to the east of what is today seen as Renaissance Europe. Their painting is concerned with the specific nature of the eastern world, and in particular the customs, architecture, and culture of Arabic Alexandria, one of Venice's long-standing trading partners. The Bellinis did not dismiss the Mamluks of Egypt, the Ottomans, or the Persians as barbaric. Instead, they were acutely aware that these cultures possessed many things that the city states of Europe desired. These included precious commodities, technical, scientific, and artistic knowledge, and ways of doing business that came from the east. The painting of St Mark in Alexandria shows how the European Renaissance began to define itself not in opposition to the east, but through an extensive and complex exchange of ideas and materials.

The Bellinis' Venetian contemporaries were explicit about their reliance upon such transactions. Venice was perfectly situated as a commercial intermediary, able to receive commodities from these eastern bazaars, and then transport them to the markets of northern Europe. Writing at the same time as the Bellinis worked on their painting of St Mark, Canon Pietro Casola reported with amazement the impact that this flow of goods from the east had upon Venice itself:

Indeed it seems as if all the world flocks here, and that human beings have concentrated there all their force for trading . . . who could count the many shops so well furnished that they almost seem warehouses, with so many cloths of every make – tapestry, brocades and hangings of every design, carpets of every sort, camlets [sheets] of every colour and texture, silks of every kind; and so many warehouses full of spices, groceries and drugs, and so much beautiful wax! These things stupefy the beholder.

East-west trade in these goods had been taking place throughout the Mediterranean for centuries, but its volume increased following the end of the Crusades. From the 14th century Venice fought competitors like Genoa and Florence to establish its dominance of the trade from the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean that terminated at Alexandria. Venetian and Genoese trading centres and consuls were established in Alexandria, Damascus, and Aleppo, and even further afield. While Europe predominantly exported bulk goods such as textiles, timber, glassware, soap, paper, copper, salt, silver, and gold, it tended to import luxury and high-value goods. These ranged from spices (black pepper, nutmeg, cloves, and cinnamon), cotton, silk, satin, velvet, and carpets to opium, tulips, sandalwood, porcelain, horses, rhubarb, and precious stones, as well as vivid dyes used in textile manufacture and painting.

Their impact upon the culture and consumption of communities from Venice to London was gradual but profound. Every sphere of life was affected, from eating to painting. As the domestic economy changed with this influx of exotic goods, so did art and culture. The palette of painters like the Bellinis was also expanded by the addition of pigments like lapis lazuli, vermilion, and cinnabar, all of which were imported from the east via Venice, and provided Renaissance paintings with their characteristic brilliant blues and reds. The loving detail with which the Bellini painting of St Mark reproduces silk, velvet, muslin, cotton, tiling, carpets, even livestock, reflected the Bellinis' awareness of how these exchanges with the east were

transforming the sights, smells, and tastes of the world, and the ability of the artist to reproduce them.

The eastern bazaars of Cairo, Aleppo, and Damascus were also responsible for shaping the architecture of Renaissance Venice. The Venetian art historian Giuseppe Fiocco described Venice as a 'colossal *sug*', and more recently architectural historians have noticed how many characteristics of the city were based on direct emulation of eastern design and decor. The Rialto market, with its linear buildings arranged in parallel to the main arteries is strikingly similar to the layout of the Syrian trading capital of Aleppo. The windows, arches, and decorative façades of the Doge's Palace and the Palazzo Ducale all draw their inspiration from the mosques, bazaars, and palaces of cities like Cairo, Acre, and Tabriz, where Venetian merchants had traded for centuries. Venice was a quintessential Renaissance city, not just for its combination of commerce and aesthetic luxury, but also for its admiration and emulation of eastern cultures.

### Credits and debits

One characteristic of the Renaissance was a new expression of wealth, and the related consumption of luxury goods. Economic and political historians have fiercely debated the reasons for the changes in demand and consumption from the 14th century onwards. The belief in the flowering of the spirit of the Renaissance is also strangely at odds with the general belief that the 14th and 15th centuries experienced a profound period of economic depression. Prices fell and wages slumped. The impact of the outbreak of Black Death in 1348 only intensified these problems. However, one of the consequences of widespread disease and death, just like warfare, is often radical social change and upheaval. Such was the case in Europe in the aftermath of the plague. As well as disease, warfare ravaged the region. The Muslim-Christian conflict in Spain and North Africa (1291-1341), the Genoese-

Venetian wars (1291-9, 1350-5, 1378-81), and the Hundred Years War across northern Europe (1336-1453) disrupted trade and agriculture, creating a recurrent pattern of inflation and deflation. One consequence of all this death, disease, and warfare was a concentration on urban life, and an accumulation of wealth in the hands of a small but rich elite.

As in most periods of history, where some people experience depression and decline, others see opportunity and fortune. States like Venice capitalized on the growing demand for luxury goods, and developed new ways of moving larger quantities of merchandise. Their older galleys, narrow oared ships, were gradually replaced by the heavy, round-bottomed masted ships, or 'cogs', used to transport bulky goods such as timber, grain, salt, fish, and iron between northern European ports. These cogs were able to transport over 300 'barrels' of merchandise (one 'barrel' equalled 900 litres), more than three times the amount possible aboard the older galley. By the end of the 15th century the three-masted 'caravel' was developed. Based on Arabic designs, it took up to 400 barrels of merchandise and was also considerably faster than the cog.

As the amount and speed of distribution of merchandise increased, so ways of transacting business also changed. The complexity of balancing the import and export of both essential and luxury international goods and calculating credit, profit, and rates of interest sounds so familiar to us today that it is easy to see why the Renaissance is often referred to as the birthplace of modern capitalism. Just as Christian European merchants trafficked in the exotic goods of the east, so they incorporated Arabic and Islamic ways of doing business through their exposure to the bazaars and trading centres throughout North Africa, the Middle East, and Persia.

In the 13th century the Pisan merchant Leonardo Pisan, known as Fibonacci, used his commercial exposure to Arabic ways of

reckoning profit and loss to introduce Hindu-Arabic numerals into European commerce. Fibonacci explained the nature of the Hindu-Arabic numerals from '0' to '9', the use of the decimal point, and their application to practical commercial problems involving addition, subtraction, multiplication, division, and the gauging of weights and measures, as well as bartering, charging of interest, and exchanging currency. While this may seem straightforward today, it is worth remembering that signs for addition (+), subtraction (-), and multiplication (×) were unknown in Europe before the 15th century.

The kind of Arabic commercial practice that Fibonacci borrowed from drew on earlier Arabic developments in mathematics and geometry. For instance, the basic principles of algebra were adopted from the Arabic term for restoration, *al-jabru*. Around AD 825 the Persian astronomer Abu Ja'far Mohammed ibn Mūsā al-Khōwārizmī wrote a book which included the rules of arithmetic for the decimal positional number system, called *Kitāb al-jābr w'al-muqābala* ('Rules of Restoration and Reduction'). His Latinized name provided the basis for the further study of one of the cornerstones of modern mathematics: the algorithm.

Fibonacci's new methods were adopted in the trading centres of Venice, Florence, and Genoa. They realized that new ways of keeping track of increasingly complex and international commercial transactions were needed. Payment on goods was often provided in silver or gold bullion, but as sales increased and more than two people became involved in any one business deal, new ways of trading were required. One of the most significant innovations was the bill of exchange, the earliest example of paper money. A bill of exchange was the ancestor of the modern cheque, which originated from the medieval Arabic term *sakk*. When you write a cheque, you are drawing on your creditworthiness at a bank. Your bank will honour the cheque when the holder presents it for payment. A 14th-century trader would similarly pay for a consignment of merchandise with a paper bill of exchange drawn

from a powerful merchant family, who would honour the bill when it was presented either on a specific later date, or upon delivery of the goods. Merchant families that guaranteed such transactions on pieces of paper soon transformed themselves into bankers as well as merchants. The merchant turned banker made money on these transactions by charging interest based on the amount of time it took for the bill to be repaid and through manipulating the rate of exchange between different international currencies.

The medieval church still forbade usury, defined as the charging of interest on a loan. The religious tenets of both Christianity and Islam officially forbade usury, but in practice both cultures found loopholes to maximize financial profit. Merchant bankers could disguise the charging of interest by nominally lending money in one currency and then collecting it in a different currency. Built into this process was a favourable rate of exchange that allowed the merchant banker to profit by a percentage of the original amount. The banker therefore held money on 'deposit' for other merchants and in return established sufficient 'credit' for other merchants to accept their bills of exchange as a form of money in its own right. Another solution was to employ Jewish merchants to handle credit transactions and act as commercial mediators between the two religions, for the simple reason that Jews were free of any official religious prohibition against usury. From this historical accident emerged the anti-Semitic stereotype of Jews and their supposed predisposition towards international finance, a direct product of Christian and Muslim hypocrisy.

The accumulating wealth and status of merchant bankers laid the foundations for the political power and artistic innovation characteristic of the European Renaissance. The Medici family who dominated Florentine politics and culture throughout the 15th century started out life as merchant bankers. In 1397 Giovanni di Bicci de' Medici established the Medici Bank in Florence, which soon perfected the art of double-entry bookkeeping and accounting, deposit and transfer banking, maritime insurance, and the

circulation of bills of exchange. The Medici Bank also became 'God's banker' by transferring the papacy's funds throughout Europe. By 1429 the humanist scholar and Florentine chancellor Poggio Bracciolini argued that 'money is necessary as the sinews that maintain the state', and that it was 'very advantageous, both for the common welfare and for civic life'. Examining the impact of trade and commerce on cities, he could rightly celebrate the 'many magnificent houses, distinguished villas, churches, colonnades, and hospitals [that] have been constructed in our own time' with the money generated by the Medici.

### East meets west

International trade and new financial practices shaped what people made and what they consumed throughout the 14th and 15th centuries. In 1453, the Hundred Years War between England and France ended. One consequence of the peace was an intensification of trade between northern and southern Europe. At the other end of Europe 1453 witnessed another equally momentous event. This was the year that the Islamic Ottoman Empire finally conquered Constantinople. Its fall to the Ottoman forces signalled a decisive shift in international political power. It confirmed the Ottomans as one of the most powerful empires in Europe and a player in shaping the subsequent art and culture of the Renaissance.

In the spring of 1453 over 100,000 troops laid siege to Constantinople, and in May Sultan Mehmed II captured the city. As the capital of the Byzantine Empire, Constantinople was one of the last connections between the world of classical Rome and 15th-century Italy. It acted as a conduit for the recovery of much of the learning of classical culture, thanks initially to the patronage of Sultan Mehmed. His affinity with the political ambitions and cultural tastes of his Italian counterparts led him to employ Italian humanists who 'read to the Sultan daily from ancient historians such as Laertius, Herodotus, Livy and Quintus Curtius and from chronicles of the popes and the Lombard kings'. If the Renaissance

involved the rebirth of classical ideals, then Mehmed was one of its adherents. His library, much of which remains in the Topkapi Saray in Istanbul, surpassed those of the Medici and Sforza in Italy, and included copies of Ptolemy's *Geography*, Homer's *Iliad*, and other texts in Greek, Hebrew, and Arabic. He explicitly compared his imperial achievements to those of Alexander the Great, and saw himself as a new Caesar, with the potential to conquer Rome and unify the three great religions of the book – Christianity, Islam, and Judaism.

Like many other Renaissance leaders with aspirations to imperial power, Mehmed used learning, art, and architecture to magnify his claims to absolute political authority. He embarked upon an ambitious building programme that involved repopulating the city with Jewish and Christian merchants and craftsmen, founding the Great Bazaar that established the city's pre-eminence as an international trading centre, and renaming it Istanbul. He renovated the church of Hagia Sophia, transforming it into the city's first sultanic mosque, whilst at the same time hiring Italian architects to assist in the building of his new imperial palace, the Topkapi Saray. The new international architectural idiom, drawing on classical, Islamic, and contemporary Italian styles, aimed to produce what one Ottoman commentator called 'a palace that would outshine all and be more marvellous than all preceding palaces in looks, size, cost and gracefulness'. This international Renaissance style would also be recognizable to both Muslims and Christians alike, as confirmed by the Venetian ambassador, who praised the Topkapi as 'the most beautiful, the most convenient, and most miraculous [palace] in the world'. Like so many Renaissance buildings and artefacts, the Topkapi was both an original creative act and a highly political object. The two impulses were inseparable – a defining feature of the Renaissance.

Such international competition between eastern and western states and empires stimulated a whole new generation of Renaissance thinkers, writers, and artists. Many offered their services to

Mehmed, including the Venetian painter Gentile Bellini who painted a portrait of Mehmed that still hangs in the National Gallery in London. Bellini returned to Venice with gifts from Mehmed, and 'a chain wrought in the Turkish manner, equal in weight to 250 gold crowns'. In the painting of *Saint Mark Preaching in Alexandria*, at the foot of Mark's pulpit, is a self-portrait of Gentile; round his neck hangs the chain presented to him by Mehmed. Bellini proudly displayed the fruits of Mehmed's patronage, and used his experiences in Istanbul to add exotic detail to his depiction of Alexandria.

These exchanges quickly affected the style of what we now call Renaissance art. When the Italian artist Costanzo da Moysis also went to Istanbul to work for Mehmed, his paintings and drawings drew on the artistic conventions of Persian and Ottoman art. The pen and gouache drawing attributed to Costanzo, entitled *Seated Scribe*, is an intimate study of an Ottoman scribe, complete with Persian inscription in the top right-hand corner. The use of bright, flat colours and painstaking attention to the detail of dress, posture, and design, shows Costanzo's absorption of various principles of Chinese, Persian, and Ottoman artistic styles. The two-way exchange of influences can be seen in a remarkable copy of Costanzo's drawing attributed to the 15th-century Persian artist Bihzād, entitled *Portrait of a Painter in Turkish Costume*, executed some years after Costanzo's drawing. Bihzād learns from his Italian contemporary, while subtly changing the scribe into a painter, shown working on precisely the kind of Islamic portrait originally copied by Costanzo. Each artist draws on the aesthetic innovations of the other, making it impossible to say which painting is definably 'western' or 'eastern'.

The accession of Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent in 1520 intensified artistic and diplomatic exchanges. Süleyman commissioned grand tapestries from Flemish weavers, jewellery and an imperial crown from Venetian goldsmiths that he wore whilst laying siege to Vienna in 1532, and commissioned the great



3. Costanzo da Moysis's exquisite *Seated Scribe*

Ottoman architect Mimar Koca Sinan to build a series of palaces, mosques, and bridges to rival those of his Italian counterparts. Sinan drew on Turko-Islamic architectural traditions as well as the Byzantine heritage provided by the great church of Hagia Sophia to produce a series of mosques in Istanbul with domed central plans in the early 16th century. When Pope Julius II employed the architects





4. The Persian master Bihzād's *Portrait of a Painter*

Donato Bramante and later Michelangelo to rebuild St Peter's in Rome, their designs drew on Hagia Sophia, with its half-domes and minaret towers, as well as Sinan's mosques and palaces. Both Ottoman and Italian architects were competing to rebuild their imperial cities by drawing on a shared intellectual and aesthetic tradition.

What such exchanges and rivalries suggest is that there were no clear geographical or political barriers between east and west in the Renaissance. It is a much later, 19th-century belief in the absolute cultural and political separation of the Islamic east and Christian west that has obscured the easy exchange of trade and ideas between these two cultures. The two sides were often in religious and military conflict with each other. However, the point is that material and commercial exchanges between them carried on in spite of these conflicts, and produced a fertile environment for cultural achievements on both sides. Their shared cultural heritage of a contested classical past led to new achievements that we now recognize as typically Renaissance.

### The winds of change

Rather than shutting off cultural contact between east and west, once it was in control of Constantinople the Ottoman Empire simply placed a levy on such exchanges. The Ottoman authorities taxed the overland trade routes into Persia, Central Asia, and China, but this just created new ways of doing business. The end of the Hundred Years War stimulated a greater circulation of trade between northern and southern Europe, intensifying the demand for exotic goods from the east. This accelerated the scale of commercial exchange, and led Christian European states to seek ways of circumventing heavy tariffs. Most eastern merchandise was paid for in European gold and silver bullion. As the ore mines in Central Europe began to run dry and tariffs escalated, new sources of revenue were needed: this led directly to an increase in exploration and discovery.

For centuries gold had trickled into Europe via North Africa and the trans-Saharan caravan routes. Gold from the mines of Sudan was moved along these routes to Tunis, Cairo, and Alexandria, where Italian merchants exchanged it for European goods. From the beginning of the 15th century the Portuguese crown and merchants realized that seaborne travel along the African coastline could tap into these gold and spice markets at source, circumventing taxes imposed on overland trade routes through Ottoman territories. Such an ambitious project involved organization and capital. By the mid-15th century German, Florentine, Genoese, and Venetian merchants were sponsoring Portuguese voyages down the coast of West Africa and offering the Portuguese king a percentage of any profits.

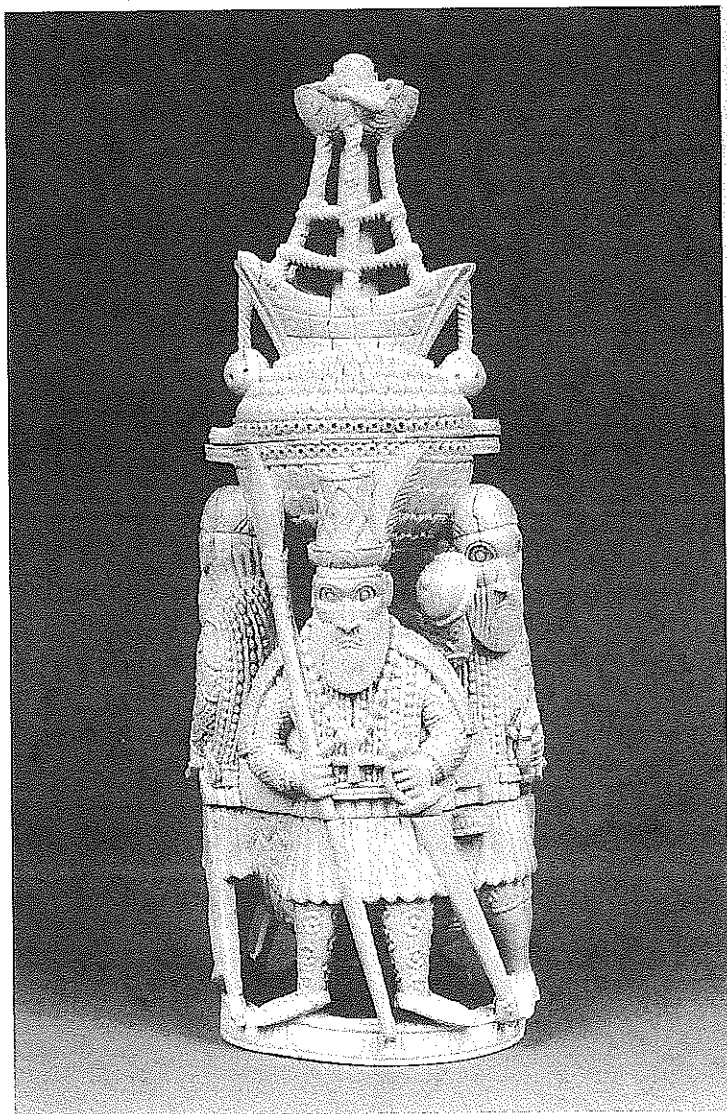
However, it was not only gold that flowed back into Europe through these African trade routes. While travelling through the kingdom of a chieftain called 'Budomel' in southern Senegal, the Venetian merchant Alvise Cadamosto traded seven horses 'which together had cost me originally about three hundred ducats' for 100 slaves. For the Venetian this was a profitable deal, based on an accepted exchange rate of nine to fourteen slaves for one horse (it is estimated that at this time Venice had a population of over 3,000 slaves). Writing in 1446, Cadamosto estimated that 1,000 slaves were shipped from the region of Arguim every year. They were taken to Lisbon and sold throughout Europe. This trade represents one of the darkest sides of the European Renaissance, and marked the beginnings of a trans-Atlantic slave trade that was to bring misery and suffering to millions of Africans over subsequent centuries. It is sobering to note how the economies funding the great cultural achievements of the Renaissance were profiting by this unscrupulous trade in human lives.

The African gold, pepper, cloth, and slaves that flowed back into mainland Europe, alongside the merchandise imported from the east also sowed the seeds of a global understanding of the early modern world. In 1492, on the eve of Columbus's first voyage to the

New World, the German cloth merchant Martin Behaim created an object that encompassed the fusion of global economics and artistic innovation that was becoming increasingly characteristic of the time. This was the first known terrestrial globe of the world. Illustrated with over 1,100 place names and 48 miniatures of kings and rulers, Behaim's globe also contained legends describing merchandise, commercial practices, and trade routes. The globe was a commercial map of the Renaissance world, created by someone who was both a merchant and a geographer. Behaim recorded his own commercial experiences in West Africa between



5. The first modern terrestrial globe, made in Nuremberg in 1492 by the German merchant Martin Behaim following his return from West Africa



6. An early 16th-century Bini-Portuguese salt cellar, designed by Portuguese travellers, carved by African craftsmen: the result is a completely new Renaissance art object

1482 and 1484, and they give some indication of what motivated his voyages. He sailed 'with various goods and merchandise for sale and barter', including horses 'to be presented to Moorish kings', as well as 'various examples of spices to be shown to the Moors in order that they might understand what we sought in their country'. Spices, gold, and slaves: these commodities underpinned the creation of the first truly global image of the Renaissance world.

Such cultural and commercial influences were not all one-way. One Portuguese chronicler noted that, 'in Sierra Leone, men are very clever and make extremely beautiful objects such as spoons, salt cellars, and dagger hilts'. This is a direct reference to the 'Afro-Portuguese ivories'. Carved by African artists from Sierra Leone and Nigeria, these beautiful artworks fuse African style with European motifs to create a hybrid object that is unique to both cultures. Salt cellars and oliphants (hunting horns) were particularly common examples of such carvings, and were owned by figures like Albrecht Dürer and the Medici family. One particularly striking salt cellar, dated to the early 16th century, depicts four Portuguese figures supporting a basket upon which sails a Portuguese ship. With an added touch of humour a sailor peeps out from the crow's nest. The details of the clothing, weapons, and rigging are obviously drawn from detailed observation of and encounters with Portuguese seafarers. Scholars believe that these carvings were designed for export to Europe. The delicate beaded, braided, and twisted features of these carvings heavily influenced the architecture of 16th-century Portugal as it began to raise monuments celebrating its commercial power in Africa and the Far East.