

The Ideal Renaissance Man

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The qualities and characteristics described in Baldassare Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier* and in Giorgio Vasari's *Life of Leonardo: Painter and Sculptor of Florence* can be viewed in a broader context as the desirable traits embodied in the ideal Renaissance Man. Each of the passages examined share common elements. Castiglione places great importance on the martial characteristics and Vasari extols the specific artistic traits of Leonardo DaVinci, which will be treated as general characteristics for the purpose of comparison.

The first item Castiglione mentions is noble birth while Vasari is silent on this point. Even today, when a child is born into a family with a good reputation, the expectation is that the child will become an acceptable member of society and act in a manner consistent with the position of the family within the society. Castiglione writes that men "if rightly trained are nearly always like those from whom they spring." (Sayer, 491) He also suggests that the motivation to act correctly is from "fear of shame and by hope of praise." (Sayer, 491) The attributes that both authors indicate are a keen intellect, physical fitness, beautiful appearance, gracefulness and talent that far surpasses normal human characteristics "as if some god had formed them" (Sayer, 491) as Castiglione writes and is echoed by Vasari that "(DaVinci's) ... every action ... is clearly bestowed by God..." (Sayer, 493).

According to Castiglione, the martial traits and skills were an essential part such that the qualities of physical strength, boldness, and loyalty were demonstrated consistently "at all times in all places." (Sayer, 492) Familiarity with the dueling weapons of a gentleman and with personal combat was also considered important in order to respond when a situation arose that honor demanded a response. Furthermore, having a willingness to fight when needed but a temperament that was not too eager to fight was appealing. He contrasts those traits with others that he views as perhaps too common such as courtiers that "curl their hair and pluck their brows,

but gloss their faces with all those arts employed by the most wanton and unchaste women.” (Sayer, 492) He goes on to indicate that there are artificial or exaggerated patterns of speech which should not be used because they make the speaker appear weak or frail.

Vasari focuses on the intellectual and artistic talents exhibited by DaVinci – everything from writing, mathematics, music, and singing to drawing, sculpture, architecture, engineering, and painting. He writes that “(DaVinci) knew so well how to express his conceptions” in his drawings. (Sayer, 493) While he did many things during his life, DaVinci seems to have spent most of his time drawing. The large number of artistic and scientific disciplines in which he was proficient is notable because he showed a great amount of skill in all of them. Vasari writes that “so great was his genius, ... that to whatever difficulties he turned his mind, he solved them with ease.” (Sayer, 492)

The central points of both authors give a good template of the ideal attributes that would be part of the makeup of a Renaissance Man. Military prowess and martial skills, which lend themselves to destruction and conflict, are balanced by the artistic and scientific knowledge that can be used for creation that benefit society as a whole, which – when considered together – form a more complete ideal than either would form alone.

References

Sayre, Henry M. (2012). *The Humanities. Culture, Continuity and Change. Books 3 & 4* Saddle Rock, NJ: Prentice Hall.