The European Renaissance in American Life

Paul F. Grendler
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RELIVING THE RENAISSANCE

The best way to celebrate the Renaissance is to relive it. And that is what millions of Americans do in a variety of ways. They dress, act, and speak like English men and women in the sixteenth century. They think of themselves as Renaissance men and women, that is, as multitalented human beings. If they are not as talented as Leonardo da Vinci, they study Leonardo's methods in order to be like him. Fortunately, they receive a lot of help in reliving the Renaissance from businesses that sell Renaissance products, food, and lodging. Renaissance images and icons remind Americans of the great figures of the European Renaissance. Computer experts explain that the invention of the computer is like the invention of printing in the Renaissance with even more potential to expand learning. Religious paintings from the Renaissance help Americans to get closer to God. In all these ways, Americans try to relive a period of history that occurred 500 years ago.
Renaissance Faires

William Shakespeare, on vacation from London, walks along the Queen’s Way in the village of Wixonshire. He spies a servant girl in a rough brown dress and dirty apron coming out of a thatched cottage. He sees her pretty face and fetching eye, and nudges his companion: “Yon wench is most marvelous comely. Perchance we may greet her over a pottle of ale at the Boare and the Beare.” Then they hear shouts. They come upon two men in plumed hats, full-sleeved red shirts, black tights, and high leather boots, the garb of nobles. One accuses the other of making a slighting remark about Good Queen Bess and draws his sword. They fight with verbal insults and swinging swords, while the crowd eggs them on. Will pauses to watch with a bemused expression on his face. So goes life in Renaissance England in 1594.

But this is not 1594, rather 2004. And the place is Plantersville, Texas, not Wixonshire, England. For seven weekends in October and November 2004, thousands dressed themselves in period clothing, put on swords, and descended on Plantersville for the Texas Renaissance Festival. They came in order to relive the Renaissance. Nearly 6 million Americans relived the Renaissance by participating in Renaissance fairs in 2004.
Come to the Faire

Renaissance faires are a combination of outdoor costume party, interactive entertainment, and commercial enterprise. (Everyone associated with them writes "faire" instead of "fairs" and "garb" instead of "costume.") Even though they often refer to England and Shakespeare, Renaissance faires are completely different from serious Shakespeare festivals, which produce performances of Shakespeare's plays and other dramatic works and train theater professionals. By contrast, the goal of Renaissance faires is to provide fun and light entertainment. Operators of faires and the merchants who sell Renaissance artifacts and garb try to make a profit. And the fairgoers only want to relive the Renaissance for a day. Although this phenomenal expression of enthusiasm for a part of the distant past attracts little attention from students of American culture, faires mean a great deal to the participants, merchants, and local communities.

Renaissance faires may have begun in California in 1963. One group asserts that Phyllis and Ronald Patterson created and opened to the public the first Renaissance faire in Laurel Canyon in the Hollywood Hills on May 11 and 12, 1963. So far, no one has disputed this claim of priority. Others followed. The Northern California Renaissance Faire, which now meets in Hollister, southwest of San Jose, states that it began in 1967. The Pattersons founded a fall Renaissance faire in Marin County, directly north of San Francisco, in 1968. It continues today in Novato, also in Marin County. These seem to be the oldest continuously running Renaissance faires. It is possible that others, begun in the 1960s, have since disappeared.

Several other faires, including some of the largest, began in the 1970s. The huge Minnesota Renaissance Festival at Shakopee, just south of Minneapolis, began in 1971, and the Bristol Renaissance Faire at Kenosha, Wisconsin, began in 1973. The very large

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The figures apply only to living faires for which foundation dates are known.

One hundred and fifty-seven faires in forty states opened their gates to the public in the United States in 2004, plus six more in Canada. There may be additional small faires that attract only local attention. As there were 115 known Renaissance faires in America and Canada in 1999, the number is growing.

California, with thirty, had the most in 2004, followed by Florida with eleven, Michigan with nine, and Ohio and Washington with seven each. Some faires are open only for a two-day weekend in spring or fall and attract a thousand or fewer visitors. Others are open for up to six or seven consecutive weekends and attract 200,000 to more than 300,000 visitors. The majority are in between, with 30,000 to 50,000 visitors. All the large Renaissance faires and most smaller ones have permanent sites. A few of the smaller faires
rotate from place to place within a state. Some faires have campgrounds, whereas others direct visitors to nearby campgrounds.

The two largest faires are located in very different parts of the country. The Texas Renaissance Festival at Plantersville was open on Saturdays and Sundays, from 9 a.m. until dusk, October 2 through November 14, 2004, a total of fourteen days, and attracted 320,000 visitors. The Minnesota Renaissance Festival is located at Shakopee, thirty minutes south of Minneapolis on a major highway. Its 22-acre site was open from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. for seven weekends from August 14 through September 26, 2004, with attendance of about 315,000. The Maryland Renaissance Festival is located on a permanent 26-acre site at Crownsville, just outside of Annapolis. It ran for nine weekends from August 28 through October 24, with attendance of 290,000. Other large Renaissance faires include the Arizona Renaissance Festival, near Phoenix, with about 265,000 visitors, the Georgia Renaissance Festival at Fairburn, Georgia, with 250,000 visitors, and the Michigan Renaissance Festival near Detroit had about 230,000 visitors. Seven other Renaissance faires in California (two), Colorado, Massachusetts, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, and Texas had estimated attendance of 200,000 in 2004.

The 157 known American faires attracted a grand total of about 5,900,000 paying visitors in 2004, an average of about 38,000 each. This does not mean that 5,900,000 different individuals each attended a fair for a single day. Some patrons paid admission for more than one day or attended more than one faire. On the other hand, the figures do not include entertainers, the merchants selling goods in their booths, and the employees of food courts.

The largest faires are multimillion-dollar operations. Admission ranges from $15 to $21 for adults, and some do not offer lower priced tickets for children and seniors. For example, when the 320,000 visitors at the Texas Renaissance Festival pay the admission price of $21 (no discounts for seniors and children), this produces admissions income of $6,720,000. The Minnesota Renaissance Festival charges adults $17.95, seniors aged 60 and older $15.95, children six to twelve years $8.95, with children under five free. Although the mix of adults, seniors, and children is unknown, it is likely that entrance fees generated more than $5,000,000. The Maryland Renaissance Festival charges $14.95 for admission, with no discounts for children or seniors. With attendance of 290,000, this produced admissions income of $4,335,000. In earlier decades, faires often offered free or reduced admission prices to those who came in costume. This has almost completely disappeared. A handful of faires are run to raise money for charity, and a few small faires are free. But the vast majority of faires, especially the large ones, are significant commercial ventures.

Faire managements also derive income in other ways. Most forbid attendees to bring in food or drink. Thus, visitors must buy food, beer, mead, ale, wine, or soft drinks at the faire, plus all kinds of merchandise. Management sells or rents small frame buildings that serve as commercial booths and rents space for tents for those wishing to sell merchandise, food, and drink. In 2004, the sale price of a small-frame non-winterized building with frontage of 16 feet or more was $25,000 to $50,000 at large faires, plus rent for the frontage on the paths that visitors trod. The advantage to the purchaser is that he or she has possession of the building and may use it year after year. Rent for a building costs $1,000 to $3,000 per season and for a tent a few hundred dollars. A vetting process ensures that the building or space will be used for activities consistent with the faire's activities. As always, the three most important considerations are location, location, and location. A booth or tent space in a main thoroughfare, or near the entrance, or adjacent to a stage or arena, costs more than one in a remote part of the faire. Liability insurance, legal fees, and sometimes license fees to operate rides, sell food, or to perform certain
activities such as glassblowing or hair dressing add to the cost for the merchants.

Dedicated fairegoers tend to be young, middle-class, and better educated than the population at large. According to a 1998 survey, slightly more women than men (53 percent to 46 percent) attended faires. They were young: 35 percent were aged 35 or younger, 28 percent were 36 to 45 years of age, 24 percent were 46 to 55 years of age, and only 5 percent older than 56. Only 44 percent were married, the consequence of relative youth. Sixty percent had annual incomes between $21,000 and $60,000, and 24 percent had incomes of more than $60,000. Fifty-two percent were homeowners. They need a certain level of income, because a day at a Renaissance faire can be expensive. One veteran fairegoer estimated in 2003 that a day at the Texas Renaissance Festival could cost a family of four $200 to $250 for admission, food, and purchases. Sixty-four percent had college degrees, making them considerably better educated than the population at large. Ninety-three percent purchase at least one book about the Renaissance or Middle Ages annually. Although there is no precise information, it is very likely that dedicated fairegoers hold white-collar positions and are overwhelmingly white rather than members of minority groups. Eighty-one percent of committed fairegoers own one or more Renaissance costumes (garb). About half of them, probably almost all men, possess one or more of sword, dagger, and knife. Many attend two Renaissance faires annually. Although these are dedicated faire patrons, it is likely that more casual patrons fit the same demographic, income, and education profiles.

The first California Renaissance Faire took the English Renaissance as its historical theme, and the majority of faires have emphasized sixteenth-century England ever since. If they are more precise, they focus on the reign of Queen Elizabeth I (1558–1603), or the lifetime of William Shakespeare (1564–1616) or, less often, the reign of Henry VIII (1509–1547). Most Renaissance faires also announce that they are re-creating a precise place (often fictitious) and year. In 2004, the places and years included Scarborough in 1533, New Market in 1540, Lamont in 1562, Coventry Live Oak in 1565, Kingston upon Hull in the 1570s, Wixonshire in 1575, Westminster in 1593, Larkspur in 1598, and Hollygrove in 1600. Revel Grove and the Kingdom of Avondale without dates were also the sites of faires. A handful of faires announce themselves as medieval faires, and choose accordingly, such as the Camlann Medieval Faire in Carnation (near Redmond), Washington, whose theme was Camlann Village. It announced that it was bringing to life "the complete, colorful world of Chaucer in the year 1376." Geoffrey Chaucer, the great English poet and author of The Canterbury Tales, lived from about 1340 until 1400.

An exception to the English emphasis is the Italian Renaissance Festival at the former Hialeah Race Track in Hialeah, Florida. It advertises itself as "the only Italian Renaissance Festival in the Western Hemisphere." It claims to re-create or evoke the real city of Lucca, Italy, in Tuscany, in 1502, a year of no particular significance in Italy. The Italian Renaissance Festival promises that Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci will come. So will "over 225 authentically costumed characters in our daily Grand Parade." The festival emphasizes Italian acts, including a man who announces himself as "Guido Libido, the Hopeless Romantic! Friend to all women. Alllllll women! Sometimes twice! I tell love stories throughout the ages, the way they REALLY happened! Because in the books they got it all wrong." Elegantly gowne courtisans also appear at the fair. The Italian Renaissance Festival explains that "during the Renaissance, a Courtisan was chosen for her Beauty, Charm, Wit and Intelligence in order to serve as companion to the Gentlemen of the Court. It was expected that a Courtisan was educated in classical subjects as Art, Music, Poetry and Politics." (This was sometimes true but not the whole story. However graceful and learned she might be, a courtisan's primary
of sex outside of marriage. And her life was not always glamorous.)

Of course, the purpose of Renaissance faires is to enable the paying customers to have a good time. Hence, all the unpleasant aspects of the Renaissance, such as war, disease, and poverty, are ignored. Faires want visitors to enjoy themselves and to come again.

Advertisements for Renaissance faires emphasize reliving the past, colorful activities and characters, entertainment, playacting, and nostalgia. For example, the Northern California Renaissance Faire of September and October 2004 announced a return to “our lovely English Village” for a harvest time marketplace faire. "We’ll step back once more to the romantic and bawdy days of the Renaissance.” “We will welcome back with pride our beloved Queen Elizabeth I and her noble court.” “Visitors will find a colorful reception in our witty Washer Women, our tireless Mongers, . . . our colorful Fools, our crooked Constables, and our beloved peasants.” “Ales will be cold, Belles will be beautiful and bawdy, swashbuckling swordfighters will be dashing and daring. Heroic Knights in armor will awaken the arena with full contact jousting, while jugglers and jesters bring mirth to the stages.” “Our aim is to provide our audience with the highest quality entertainment and standard of illusion in order to escape the modern world, if only for a day.”

The Minnesota Renaissance Festival invites visitors to “live the legend.” “The legend of the 16th century comes to life at the Minnesota Renaissance Festival. Become part of the fantasy and magic, when kings reigned supreme and the arts flourished.” Note that the Renaissance is seen as an era when the arts flourished, a correct view of the European Renaissance. The Colorado Renaissance Festival is “where pleasures reign and merrymaking is the rule.” At the Arizona Renaissance Festival, visitors may “mingle and interact with nearly 2,000 costumed characters and their

endless merriment and mayhem. The festivities include twelve stages of music and comedy show, demonstrations of the ancient art of falconry, and a 5,000-seat arena for tournaments of armored jousting.” Faires stress their uniqueness. As the Pittsburgh Renaissance Festival put it, “each and every faire has its very own developed personality. No two festivals are alike as no two shires are ever alike. Going to one festival is definitely not going to all of them.” The point is to encourage people to visit multiple faires.

Faires want visitors to have a good time. “Ten stages of continuous entertainment, Full Combat Jousting, . . . Artisan Demonstrations, over 200 unique shoppes featuring handmade wares; music, games of skill & chance,” “five food courts and seven open air taverns.” Areas of the faire grounds are given period names. Pathways between booths are called Queen’s Way, Old Highland Highway, and Reveler’s Way. Entertainment areas become The Grande Tournament Arena, Field of Honor, the Dancing Dragon, the Unicorn Stage, and the Red Lion Stage.

The Anatomy of Faires

Every faire has four elements. First, there is live entertainment, often including jousting. There are games and activities for adults and children. Second, faires sell merchandise. Large faires have 100 to 200 booths and tents offering for sale merchandise with some connection to the Renaissance or the Middle Ages. Third, faires are places for eating and drinking. Fourth, and most important, faires are costume parties. Both the professional entertainers and a large number of visitors walk around, often in groups, in colorful Renaissance garb. They exchange verbal banter with each other in an Elizabethan patois. They create a world of make-believe.

Much of the free live entertainment is interactive historical comedy. The largest faires have ten to twenty stages or arenas
offering free entertainment throughout the day, sometimes with acts changing every thirty minutes. For example, two men in English Renaissance costume engage in a mock duel in which they threaten each other and tumble and stumble as they swing their swords wildly. They exchange comic insults, with asides to members of the audience, who are just beyond an improvised fence. Another act features a solo performer who calls himself "The Renaissance Man." He boasts that he takes the audience on "hysterically historical journeys" about life in medieval and Renaissance times in which "the atrocious is made amusing, the rotten made risible, the horrible made humorous and the terrible made to tickle your ribs." The historical journeys include "A visit to the physic (leeching)," "Queen Elizabeth’s wrathful side," "A London couple attacked by a fearsome brigand," "the proper use of a chamberpot," and a comic version of bear-baiting.16 Then there is Bob Da Vinci, "Leonardo’s younger brother," who does an act called "the da Vinci Bros." His comic acts include "the real story behind the Mona Lisa," "Galleao’s finger," and "Michelangelo and the Sistine Chapel." He invites members of the audience to take a 1519 personality test.17

Juggling acts are popular. Comics do takeoffs from scenes or monologues from Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe (1564–1593), another great Renaissance playwright. Storytellers are common. So are groups of dancers performing English, Scottish, Scandinavian, and other national dances. And when a group of singers performs English madrigals (intricate vocal music set to love poetry, with or without accompanying instruments; singing madrigals well requires skill), the entertainment reaches a higher artistic level. For example, the North Carolina Renaissance Faire Madrigal Singers issued a call for auditions in which the singers were required to sing a song, do a Shakespearean reading in "your best Elizabethan accent," have Renaissance garb, and attend regular rehearsals.18 Sometimes the entertainment is mildly educational.

Inside the rustic olde tavere, speakers explain the history of beer, ale, and mead. And sometimes the gruesome past is transformed into the comic present. At one Renaissance faire, I saw a costumed man walking through the grounds carrying a sign reading "Witch Trial at 4:30. Fun for the whole family."

Most faires also have some large-scale entertainment events. Jousting tournaments with knights in armor on horseback are common and popular. Grand parades led by Queen Elizabeth and her court sweep through the grounds. Visitors in Renaissance garb are encouraged to join the parade.

After watching actors duel, visitors may try it themselves. In one arena, participants are given swords (i.e., sticks covered in foam rubber). They flail away at each other. If a duelist is hit in the arm, he may no longer use the arm. If hit in the leg, he must hop around on the other foot until "killed" with a thrust to the body. Other games include tests of strength and throwing of the ax, knife, or darts. Rides are available, but not the mechanized rides of the twentieth-century. Faires usually include activities for children. For the more serious minded, the Pittsburgh Renaissance Festival offers a nondenominational church service at 11 a.m. on Sunday mornings.

Although Renaissance faires are a little like county and state fairs, they differ in ways besides the Renaissance theme. There is less distance or separation between the paid entertainers and the audience. In county and state fairs, the musical entertainment and horse or auto racing take place on a pavilion or racetrack at some distance from the grandstand full of spectators. Renaissance faires are more intimate. They have no large-scale pop music acts with amplifiers. Above all, visitors are encouraged to interact with the entertainers and, to some extent, become part of the entertainment through wearing garb (costumes).
The second part, selling merchandise, is important. The largest Renaissance faires have 200 to 300 booths, many of them, but also buildings holding several booths, selling all kinds of wares. In this sense, Renaissance faires are the distant descendants of medieval and Renaissance trade fairs in which merchandise came from near and far to buy and sell goods. However, the merchants at today’s Renaissance faires sell wares more or less connected to the Renaissance.

Clothing, especially Renaissance clothing, is the most important merchandise. For $100, $200, or more, one may buy the entire costume (garb) of an archer, a brewmaster, or an “apprentice wench.” Booths offer elegant gowns for would-be noblewomen and ladies-in-waiting. There are numerous individual pieces of clothing for sale, such as a yeoman’s jerkin (a short, close-fitting jacket), a lady’s bodice made of suede leather, a man’s studded doublet, Elizabethan corsets for women, tights for a man or woman, a Elizabethan surcoat, and much else. Much footwear is available. One may buy pointed-toe shoes, thigh-high boots of many styles, black-beaded shoes, and all kinds of women’s shoes. Musketeer boots are available, even though they are a little anachronistic, because musketeers were seventeenth-century French soldiers, rather than Renaissance men-at-arms. “Medieval moccasins” are popular, even though medieval Europeans could not possibly have known about the footware of North American Indians until after 1492. On the other hand, one- and two-handed swords and their scabbards certainly were worn in the Renaissance and are widely available at faires. Indeed, one can find a considerable variety of weaponry at many price levels.

Renaissance period dress or garb is an essential component. Hence, it can be purchased outside faires. Costume houses sell costumes labeled Lady Juliet, Romeo, Renaissance peasant, village wench, Renaissance knight, bar maiden from Burgundy, Queen

Isabella (queen of Castile and Spain from 1474 to 1504), tavern lady, Renaissance sorceress, merchant’s wife, faire (sic) maiden, sexy Gwenythfar, Renaissance countess, swashbuckler, and even executioner (an all-black and hooded male costume, with the advertisement showing a picture of the executioner brandishing an ax).

For those who prefer to do their own sewing, the catalogues of major pattern houses, such as Simplicity and McCall’s, sell for $12 to $15 patterns for Renaissance costumes to be made and worn to the faire. Some pattern names refer to Renaissance faires. For example, there is Simplicity’s “Fair Maiden of the Renaissance Faire” pattern, advertised as “perfect for the joust matches.” It is a pattern for the dress of a noble or upper-class Renaissance woman of uncertain nationality. Another group of patterns is called “Dress thyself for the Faire,” and features bodices and skirts. There are court jester costumes and patterns “for the Romeo in your life.” There are also patterns for “Renaissance Peasants,” described as “beggars, serfs, & knaves of the Renaissance.” There is a “Young Renaissance Maiden” pattern for teen sizes 7 to 14, and “Young Renaissance Attendant” patterns for boys and girls sizes 3 to 8. For little girls, a pattern called “Shakespearean Sprite” pictures a dress with soft-hued flowing gauze something like a ballet tutu.

Merchants at faires sell other items as well. Mugs and leather goods are available. Much jewelry evoking the Renaissance or done in period style is offered, including brooches, earrings, necklaces, pins, and poison rings. Renaissance faires are to a limited extent craft faires, because swords, jewelry, and the like are handmade by craftpersons. Items available in lesser profusion include books about the Renaissance and compact discs of performances of more or less authentic Renaissance music. For a price, artists will paint one’s portrait against a background of castle and forest. For those who do not bring enough cash, signs assure them that “We doth honor Lady Visa and the Master of the Card.”
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The third part is eating and drinking, an important source of revenue for merchants. The food courts sell wine, beer, and ale, which were widely drunk and often brewed at home in the Renaissance. They also sell mead, an alcoholic drink made of fermented honey and water, sometimes with some malt added, and flavored with spices. In the Middle Ages and Renaissance, mead was popular in regions of northern and eastern Europe where grapes could not be grown. And familiar twenty-first-century fast food is available, sometimes under a changed name that links it to the Renaissance.

The fourth and most important part of Renaissance faires is that visitors try to relive the Renaissance through their costumes and participation in faire activities. Faire management encourages participation. The Colorado Renaissance Festival tells visitors to bring imagination, good humor, and a sense of participation. Visitors participate by dressing in period costumes and interacting with the strolling actors and sometimes with the comedy acts.

Men, women, and children, young adults and the middle-aged, come dressed as Renaissance queens and kings, ladies and knights, courtiers, shopkeepers, wenches, peasants, pages, and jesters. (“Wench” is a name that faire enthusiasts like to use to describe a young woman of the lower classes who is looking for a good time and might have loose morals.) Some faires encourage patrons to come in costume by offering prizes for the best ones. Patrons lacking their own Renaissance garb may rent costumes for the day. Although more women than men dress in Renaissance garb, there are always a significant number of men in costume, often with swords at the belt. Although it varies from faire to faire and day to day, it is likely that one-third or more paying customers wear Renaissance clothing. The visitors in Renaissance garb are a significant part of the act and make Renaissance faires unique in the world of outdoor festivals. They are large costume parties generated by the same urge that has made Halloween a huge holiday.

The male visitors who come dressed in Renaissance costume including swords present a potential problem to management. On one hand, faires wish to encourage paying customers to wear Renaissance garb, including swords and other weapons. But they do not want patrons to use them. The vast majority of Renaissance faires have hit upon a compromise: they permit visitors to carry weapons so long as they are sheathed and “peace-tied.” “Peace-tied” means that the weapons are tied to their carrying piece, such as a scabbard, in such a way that no second party can pull them out and use them.

The Minnesota Renaissance Festival has different rules for different weapons. It permits patrons to wear swords, knives, dirks, and daggers so long as they are completely sheathed and peace-tied. But it bars antique firearms, toy guns, pikes, and halberds (a shaft of wood with a head and crosspiece of steel). It permits claymores (a two-edged broadsword used in Scotland) and maces, so long as they are peace-tied to the body (i.e., strapped to the back or tied to the belt). It permits bows and arrows so long as bows are unstrung and arrows tied to the quiver. And it permits walking sticks or quarterstaffs without restrictions. A small number of faires do not permit visitors to bring in weapons of any kind.

Why They Love the Faire

Renaissance faire enthusiasts, those who attend year after year and dress in garb, invariably offer two reasons for their initial visits to a Renaissance faire: an interest in history and a love of playing acting.
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"Thanks to my mom and dad, I have always been a history buff and costume junkie," writes one. Many Renaissance faire enthusiasts had parents who loved history and passed on that love to their children, by reading to them, by stopping the car to read historical markers, and other ways. Another person relates that she had two college friends who were "ren faire junkies." At first she resisted their entreaties to come along. But then "being the history buff that I am, I finally made it and had a blast. Nice people, great atmosphere, and so much to see and do! ... I started wearing garb last year, and love planning my persona (the Renaissance role to be played; see below) for each faire." Another fairegoer was introduced to faires through the medieval and Renaissance club at her Louisiana high school in 1993, became hooked, and in 2002 was married at the Texas Renaissance Festival. And while she did not meet her husband at a Renaissance faire, more than one rennie (Renaissance faire enthusiast) did meet future spouses at faires.

For another enthusiast, a search for his English and Welsh family roots led him to want to know more and to Renaissance faires. Of course, it was not always history that inspired the first visit. One man went to the Southern California Renaissance Pleasure Faire in 1971 because he had heard that "it was a good place to score dope, get stoned ... and meet like-minded members of the opposite sex." He has been attending faires ever since, probably without the dope and sex, because faires have become more family-oriented over the years. A masculine reason for attending is that men find the swords worn by fairegoers and offered for sale fascinating. One veteran fairegoer confesses that he drools over the weaponry and likes to buy swords.

History’s bastard siblings, fantasy and legend, also lead some to Renaissance faires. As one rennie explained, "I’ve always loved fantasy stories ever since I can remember being able to read: the swords, magic, adventure, big tough heroes, and strong cunning ladies. I loved to read The Lord of the Rings, ... the legends of King Arthur, and so many other great books and movies. Then when I went to college in Minnesota I heard about this ‘ren faire’ thing." Another person remembers that his mother read to him tales of King Arthur as a child. He also played with swords, as many boys probably still do. Thus J. R. Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings, which has no connection with the Renaissance, can lead people to Renaissance faires. The same is true of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, even though Arthur was a medieval king who flourished between about 490 and 540, if he ever existed. But there is some connection between the legendary King Arthur and the Renaissance. Like today’s readers, people living in the historical Renaissance of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries loved chivalric romances, including stories of the battles and loves of Arthur, Guinevere, Lancelot, Gawain, Tristan, Isolde, and other knights.23

A handful of small Renaissance faires take advantage of this interest and emphasize legend and fantasy. For example, the Camelot Harvest Faire at Beaver Dam, Wisconsin, near Milwaukee, which met for a weekend in October 2004, had as its theme an "Arthurian England Harvest Fest" in AD 450. The purpose of the faire was to raise money for the "Historic Camelot Project, a non-profit organization that "is seeking to build a recreation of a 5th-century Briton hillfort/village as an open-air experiential museum." It recommended that patrons come in Arthurian costumes, which it called "pre-medieval England." One has to compliment the organizers for placing Arthur in the fifth century, a transition period between late-Roman and early medieval England.

There is also the Journey to Camelot faire, which calls itself "Portland’s [Oregon] first annual Renaissance Faire." King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table invite all to come. Of course, there is an obvious historical contradiction: legendary early medieval Camelot has nothing to do with the Renaissance. The Four Winds Renaissance Faire in Troup (near Tyler), Texas, holds a
special Tolkien festival on Easter weekend, in which patrons are invited "to dress as their favorite Tolkien characters and interact with our cast." And just to complete the historical confusion, its theme is the "17th-century Cavalier Period—the Three Musketeers," which came after the Renaissance. Finally, there is the Robin Hood Faire at Hammond Castle at Gloucester, Massachusetts. Again, the stories about Robin Hood are based on a legendary medieval outlaw who probably never existed. And if the Robin Hood legend is based on real outlaws, they must have lived before 1250, long before the Renaissance. Finally, even Renaissance faires that emphasize historical accuracy do provide some fantasy entertainment, such as dancing dragons and dragon egg hunts. In general, Renaissance faires, although they may announce thematic dates that are clearly Renaissance, tend to elide or ignore the chronological and other differences between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, especially in the case of popular entertainment.

Mundanes, Rennies, Playtrons, and Masquers

For the serious Renaissance faire attendee, there are different levels of participation, a vocabulary to be learned, and etiquette to be followed. The least committed fairegoer is the "mundane," sometimes called "outlander." This is the person who comes dressed in "regular" or twenty-first-century garb. Mundanes or outlanders come for a good time, but they are very green about the whole experience.

The "Ren faire enthusiast," sometimes also called a "rennie" or "ren-rat," has a greater commitment to the faire. (Rennie also refers to those who follow the faire circuit as workers in the vendor booths because they love the gypsy-like life.) Ren faire enthusiasts wear Renaissance garb even when it is not completely historically accurate. Indeed, they may have a considerable amount of Renaissance garb and wear it outside the faire, which offends faire purists. Because they come to escape the outside world and to enjoy themselves, rennies also spend much time in the pubs and campgrounds. Because of their enthusiasm, they can be a nuisance to members of performing companies. On the other hand, many become playtrons (see the next page).

There is an obvious difference in commitment to reliving the Renaissance between mundanes and Ren faire enthusiasts. It is most apparent in dress, because mundanes often dress inappropriately. Rennies have no problem with those who wear twenty-first-century clothing to the faire. But they object to those who attend in the wrong costumes, such as storm trooper and Star Trek outfits, or as Batman and Elvis Presley. Storm troopers are empire soldiers in the Star Wars films; they wear all-white armored suits, including masks, and carry ray guns. This seriously offends rennies and playtrons.

Nevertheless, at least one faire invites visitors to come wearing anachronistic costumes. The Ingleside (Texas) Renaissance Faire and Christmas Craft Bazaar, which met on December 11 and 12, 2004, encouraged patrons to come in medieval, Renaissance, and Elizabethan costumes, but then added, "The occasional Klingon will only spice things up, as the natives will be scared out of their wits."

Ren faire enthusiasts condemn this attitude and those who come to faires dressed in wildly anachronistic costumes. But they counsel education. They hope to be able to explain politely to storm troopers and trekkies why their costumes are inappropriate. Another approach is to make fun of them. Those in Renaissance garb assume the personae of mystified sixteenth-century knights. They poke fun at the trekkie and ask impertinent questions about his strange outfit.

Veteran Renaissance faire participants are more tolerant of people who come only partly clad in Renaissance garb, whose
Renaissance costume is not very good or who wear sneakers with tights, or are clad in authentic Renaissance garb but walk around with cell phones in their ears. ("Don't kill the illusion with a blatant modern convenience," chides one veteran fairegoer.) Most recognize that these patrons help keep faires going through their admission fees and purchases. They realize that semiaccurate garb still represents an attempt to enter into the spirit of the past. Moreover, well aware that full Renaissance costumes are expensive, they forgive those who cannot afford them or who make their own lesser-perfect outfits. Indeed, they see their earlier selves in the outlanders who come in inadequate costumes. They remember their own first visits in partial or poor garb. But they caught the spirit, developed an understanding of faires, and made many more visits in garb. Hence, veteran fairegoers try to make the neophytes welcome in the hope and expectation that they will have a good time, get bitten by the Renaissance bug, and return.

The playtron "is the die-hard fan of a festival." He or she comes to the faire in excellent and very authentic garb and does more. He has developed a "persona," the character of someone from the Renaissance. The playtron knows well the historical theme of the faire, its place, and the year. He understands faire etiquette. If he encounters a performer, one of the paid entertainers, in the "lanes" (anywhere in the faire site beyond the stage or arena), he knows that the performer must maintain his persona, even though no longer on stage. So he plays along with the performer by pretending to be living in the Renaissance and speaking so. A playtron is so committed and knowledgeable that he might be close to becoming a member of the performing company. Indeed, the heartfelt desire of many playtrons is to become "masquers."

Masquers or stage performers are the members of the acts who travel the Renaissance faire circuit. In the judgment of masquers and playtrons alike, the best are those who have a good historical knowledge of the Renaissance and put it to use in a well-honed interactive historical comedic act. The less-skilled masquers rely too much on making jokes about the obvious differences between the Renaissance and the twenty-first century in order to get laughs. Masquers may also be hired to work the lanes (i.e., to walk around the faire grounds talking to the patrons while maintaining their Renaissance personae).

All masquers are paid performers who do their act several times a day, then go on to the next faire. They work the faire circuit nine or ten months of the year and use January and February to renew their acts. For some of the masquers, the special thrill of performing at a Renaissance faire is that they are both entertainers and educators teaching the audience something about the past. Many also perform for schools, corporate groups, and private parties, and some of them have other acts not involving the Renaissance. These actors earn their living performing. Others are enthusiastic amateurs. They get together as a performing group in order to perform at nearby faires for a few weekends every year.

The most important part for masquers and playtrons alike is building a persona. It should be based on a Renaissance occupation and a name that is reasonably historical. It might be Lady Ellen of the Clan of McShuggenah, a Scottish reference, or a cloth merchant named Robert Whitewool. Names should not be goofy, cute, or anachronistic, such as Betsy Bigboobs for a Renaissance wench, or Black N. Decker for a Renaissance carpenter. Nor should the character come from a cult movie or Tolkien. Elves, fairies, and wizards do not belong. The persona must be historical, and the garb should tell viewers the character's occupation and social status. Hence, clothing must be of the appropriate color, such as purple for a king or queen; black, red, and other vivid tones for nobles and the wealthy; and earth tones for commoners. Hats are important for almost all costumes. But jewelry and fur are limited to personae representing the rich and highborn of the Renaissance.
Language is important. The desired language is simplified Elizabethan speech. As one fairegoer put it, if you want to learn from the best, read Shakespeare. A shorter way is to consult Shakespearean lexicons. Several Web sites offer glossaries of terms. But for the average reenactor or playtron it is enough to sprinkle Elizabethan or Shakespearean phrases into ordinary speech. Hence, one should use "anon" (until later), "morrow" (day), "aye" and "nay," "verily," "fit" (a curse), "mayhap" and "perchance," and so on. Adding "right," "well," and "most" also achieves the desired effect. And one should try to use several words instead of two: "thou art most beauteous fair," "she doth be most marvelous comely." Although not mentioned as such, this advice demonstrates an awareness that Elizabethan English was more elaborate and rhetorical than twenty-first-century American English.

The fact that the fairegoer, whether mundane, enthusiast, or playtron, is encouraged to, and often does, wear historical costumes, create a persona, and speak Elizabethan English underscores two points. The committed fairegoer really does want to relive the Renaissance, at least for the day. The second is that interactive historical experiences are a key part of Renaissance faires. The patrons want to be able to interact as historical characters with the garbed performers. They wish to behave as men and women from the Renaissance. To the extent that they manage this, fairegoers become part of the faire and the Renaissance.

There is no doubt that the people who attend and/or participate in many Renaissance faires have a strong historical interest in the Renaissance period. But it is likely that for most of them, knowledge of the real Renaissance does not go much beyond surface aspects of the period, notably dress, language (so long as it is English), tournaments, and famous kings, queens, and artists.

Limited evidence in support for this assessment comes in the form of short essays about the Renaissance that faire enthusiasts submit to a contest sponsored by a leading Renaissance faire Web site. The contestants submit short essays of 1,000 to 1,500 words about any aspect of the historical Renaissance. The winning essays are then posted. Despite the effort and enthusiasm of the writers, the winning essays do not demonstrate a great deal of knowledge. They often repeat common misconceptions about the Renaissance and embrace factual errors. The problem is that, like far too many high school and university students, the essayists mostly regurgitate material found in two or three books. Unfortunately, the books used are often out-of-date accounts written for general readers. The essayists avoid reference works, which may be dry but are accurate. Nor do they use university-level textbooks on the Renaissance or Western European history. Such criticism may be a little unfair, if the reader will pardon the pun, because inexperienced authors usually need guidance from a teacher or librarian in order to locate reliable sources of information. Nevertheless, the authors deserve full praise for trying. The fact that they take the trouble to research and write about the Renaissance testifies to their eagerness to learn.

Renaissance faires and the Society for Creative Anachronism (SCA) are not the same. The SCA usually has a booth at Renaissance faires to explain itself, to solicit members, and to sell merchandise. But it is different in chronology, events, and organization. Although it advertises that it focuses on Europe before 1600, it really is medieval in its focus, that is, it concentrates on the period before 1400. SCA literature and its Web site make this clear. Another difference is that the SCA emphasizes tournaments and chivalry. It lacks the broader range of activities found in Renaissance faires. The SCA's most important annual events are elaborate faux wars involving knights in armor wielding swords and shooting arrows. They do not use firearms because medieval warriors lacked effective firearms. Renaissance men had them, and it made a deadly difference.
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There are also organizational differences. The SCA is a non-profit educational organization with about 30,000 dues-paying members organized into chapters and with an elaborate hierarchy spread across the United States and abroad. Renaissance fairegoers lack a formal organization, and there are many more of them. Although Renaissance faires and the SCA offer ways to relive the past, they are different.

Renaissance Faires Online and in Print

The Internet and print journalism enable rennies, playtrons, and others to share their enthusiasm and to learn more about faires and the Renaissance itself. The most important electronic listserve, www.renaissancefestival.com, has more than 2,000 members. Each member participates through his or her persona, that is, an assumed name with some connection with the Renaissance. They discuss all aspects of faires and related topics, such as favorite Renaissance and medieval films.

The magazine Renaissance is an integral part of faire culture. It is the creation of Yale graduate Kim Guarnaccia, whose persona is Lady Kimberly of Sherburne Isle. She attended her first Renaissance faire in 1992, at which time she was “awestruck” by the number of people who “lived their characters—dressing in period costume . . . and speaking fluently in faire accents.” In 1994, she decided to have a Renaissance wedding. “When I began to organize the music, decorations, costuming, and entertainment, I was amazed by the lack of reference material available to the mainstream.” A “comprehensive source for Renaissance information” was needed. Thus, the idea of Renaissance was born. After her wedding, she and a few friends worked hard for a year and produced the first issue in January 1996. As of the end of 2004, forty had appeared, and it is now a bimonthly. The magazine tells potential readers “Thou art cordially invited to subscribe.” The newsstand price is $5.95 per issue. A year’s mail subscription (six issues) costs $29, but the magazine tells Canadian and overseas subscribers to “pr’ythee add $9 per year.” Lady Kimberly remains the editor and publisher. She appears at the Web site in a bright red period dress with laced bodice and white blouse with puffed sleeves as “The Most Honourable Creator of this Cherished Gazette.” The cherished gazette has a circulation of 35,000.

Each issue contains 96 pages, of which 24 plus the four cover pages are in color. Two thirds of each issue is given to stories, news, columns, features, directories, letters to the editor, and a crossword puzzle. Each issue is structured around a theme. The cover story is a discussion of a large topic in several linked articles and black-and-white illustrations. A recent topic was Richard III and the princes of the tower as part of the War of the Roses in England. This was the conflict between the houses of Lancaster and York in the fifteenth century from which Henry VII (Tudor, reigned 1485–1509) emerged triumphant. The story includes the evidence pro and con about whether King Richard III (reigned 1483–1485) had the boy princes, who had better claims to the throne than he, murdered in the Tower of London. The cover story in another issue is a primer on making armor; it includes interviews with armorners. The debate over the authorship of Shakespeare’s plays, a perennial conspiracy theory that intrigues amateurs and irriates Shakespeare scholars, is another cover story. The authors are freelance writers. Renaissance encourages unsolicited manuscripts and pays 8 cents per published word.

The regular features of Renaissance include news about recent events concerning the historical Renaissance, such as the opening to the public of the restored Ospedale Santa Maria della Scala in Siena, with its superb fifteenth-century frescos. The magazine lists Renaissance art exhibitions in major American, English, French, and Italian museums. There are thoughtful reviews of “nonfiction books, such as histories (for general readers, not
professional scholars) of the Renaissance, novels, films, and music recordings. There usually is an article on how to make an item of Renaissance clothing, and a quiz article in which the reader is invited to guess the meanings of unusual English Renaissance words and phrases, some of them bawdy. A list of current Renaissance faires appears in every issue. There is a gallery of color portraits of elegantly costumed faire participants. And each issue concludes with a crossword puzzle on the theme of the cover story.

The Court Jester writes comic articles, such as “A Medieval TV Guide.” The television programs include “One Wife to Give: A new soap opera featuring Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn.” “Charlie’s Angles: Three beautiful French wenches disguise themselves as English nuns to sabotage the British while working for France’s King Charles the Bold.” “Saxons and the City” has a season premiere described thus: “After he gives her a pair of Bruno Mali glass slippers to die for, Lady Carrie unlocks her chastity belt for Sir Big and then dines the dirt over grog Cosmopolitan martinis with her three best wenchfriends.” For those who want investigative reporting, there is “Sixtus Minutes: Pope Sixtus IV interviews insincere converts to Christianity and then has them executed.” (Sixtus IV was pope from 1471 to 1484, but never acted in this way.) It is an apt parody of the relentless questioning of Mike Wallace and his colleagues.

One third of each issue is devoted to advertising. There are full-page color ads for Renaissance faires and numerous ads for Renaissance clothing, jewelry, armor, hand-painted metal shields, tents (“Makers of authentic period tentage”), footwear, and much else. Several advertisements offer to create a Renaissance wedding in every detail. The nuptial couple may rent a castle in Arizona (“Renaissance weddings in Arizona”), Oklahoma, or Louisiana for the celebration. “A replica of an English Norman keep castle is a spectacular setting for a Renaissance wedding . . . Stay in our Juliet suite.”30 One wonders how a suite named for Juliet, who supposedly lived in Verona, Italy, could be found in a medieval English castle. There are many small classified ads for merchants with names designed to capture the reader’s attention, such as “Olde Soles: Handmade Renaissance footwear.” Renaissance is carefully planned to appeal to fairegoers and merchants. It is a successful niche publication catering to a strong special interest.

**Conclusion**

In March 1999, the nationally syndicated humorist Dave Barry wrote a column about members of the Renaissance Historical Society of Florida who were rehearsing a sword fight for a future Renaissance faire. “They belong to the Renaissance Historical Society of Florida, a group of people who wear costumes and pretend they’re living during the Renaissance . . . was the historical period that started in the 15th century at approximately 3:30 p.m. when humanity, after centuries of being cooped up in the Dark Ages, finally stumbled out into the light . . . This was followed by tremendous advances in science, philosophy, literature, and paintings of naked women.”31 He goes on with humorous remarks about codpieces, sword fights, and other topics, as the group prepares for the next Renaissance faire.

Barry’s comic piece emphasizes the importance of the Renaissance and Renaissance faires in popular culture—so long as one ignores his negative comments about the Middle Ages. Renaissance faires probably bring more people to some understanding of the Renaissance than any other event, with the possible exception of popular films. But whereas films are fleeting and passive, the faires engage those who attend and endure. For the dedicated faire
enthusiast and playtron, participating in Renaissance faires is a culture; that is, a group of people who give themselves to activities centering on a theme. Participants acquire a limited knowledge about the historical Renaissance and put it to use. For all visitors, Renaissance faires offer the opportunity for reliving the Renaissance and having a good time.

Chapter 3

RENAISSANCE WEEKENDS AND LIVING LAST SUPPERS

Talented, well-educated, and affluent men and women engage in spirited and witty conversation in comfortable and elegant surroundings. They enjoy the discussion and each other's company. After a few days, the participants must leave, each to his own court or city. But they vow to return to continue the dialogue. This is what happened in the ducal palace of Urbino, Italy, in the winter of 1506. It also happens four or five times a year in Hilton Head, South Carolina; Santa Fe, New Mexico; Monterey, California; Charleston, South Carolina; and Jackson Hole, Wyoming. These are Renaissance Weekends.

Leonardo da Vinci painted the scene in which Jesus met with all his apostles for the last time. After the supper the apostles disbursed, and Jesus was arrested and crucified. Devout Christians now reenact Leonardo's painting with living persons and call their dramatic presentations "Living Last Suppers." Thus, twenty-first-century Americans re-create two well-known parts of the Renaissance: intelligent dialogue on important issues and its most famous religious painting.
Renaissance Weekends

Learned and witty conversation was a valued part of upper-class life in the Renaissance. Men and women conversed in order to explore complicated issues, to weigh alternatives, and sometimes to display their wit and sophistication. We have no transcriptions of what they said. But Renaissance authors wrote numerous books that claimed to be accounts of conversations that took place. In the books, the interlocutors meet in a palace or villa and discuss current issues as equals in an atmosphere of civility, respect, and good humor. Of course, authors undoubtedly improved the conversations that took place, and they wrote works about conversations that never took place. Nevertheless, there is ample evidence that enlightened, civil, and intelligent conversation was a prized feature of Renaissance life.

The most famous account of a Renaissance conversation is The Book of the Courtier (published 1528) of Baldassare Castiglione (1478–1529). The author claimed to report a series of conversations that took place over four long nights in the ducal palace of Urbino in north central Italy in the winter of 1506. One can visit the room in the palace at Urbino where the conversations may have taken place. It has a large fireplace, a good reason for gathering there on winter nights.

According to the book, a group of well-spoken aristocratic men and women from different parts of Italy engaged in long, brilliant, and always civil conversations. The announced theme, chosen by one of the women present, was the physical and moral qualities of the perfect courtier, a man who assists and serves a worthy prince. The speakers discussed this at length. But they also discussed practically every other major issue of interest to the intelligentsia of Italy, including education, whether birth or virtuous accomplishment constituted true nobility, the political woes of Italy, whether painting or sculpture was the greater art, how to get ahead at court, and the proper behavior for different social situations. At times, the conversations rose to great eloquence as they discussed the nature of love, truth, and beauty, and the obligations of an honorable man. At other times, it descended into jokes and puns. Throughout the participants spoke with easy grace, without labored effort or didacticism. They avoided stridency, even when presenting strongly held views. Even though it is very unlikely that any spontaneous conversations were so graceful and well modulated as those reported by Castiglione, the book is based on reality. All the speakers were historical figures known to Castiglione, and the majority, perhaps all, were present in Urbino in 1506. Several are known to have held views attributed to them by Castiglione.

The historical lesson to be learned from books such as Castiglione’s The Book of the Courtier—and there were many similar works, although none so elegant—is that upper-class Renaissance men and women believed that civil conversation in a congenial atmosphere could stimulate the mind and was part of the good life. Indeed, another Italian, Stefano Guazzo (1530–1593), wrote a book called The Civil Conversation (1574), which had many editions in Italian and in English translation.

Renaissance Weekend tries to replicate Renaissance conversation in the twenty-first century. Five times a year, several hundred accomplished and reasonably affluent Americans meet for four days to talk about a wide variety of issues. Renaissance Weekend is the creation of the husband-and-wife team of Philip Lader and Linda LeSourd Lader. Philip Lader (b. 1946) is a lawyer who became president of a company that develops and organizes recreation communities. He was then president of Winthrop University in South Carolina and ran unsuccessfully for the Democratic nomination for governor of South Carolina in 1986. He later served in the Clinton White House as deputy chief of staff and assistant to the president in 1993 and 1994, as administrator of the
Small Business Administration from 1994 to 1997, and as ambassador to the Court of St. James (i.e., ambassador to England) from 1997 until 2001. Linda Le Sourd Lader assisted White House liaison with religious groups in Clinton’s first term and currently serves on the boards of several nonprofit organizations including Habitat for Humanity International. She is president of Renaissance Institute, the entity that oversees Renaissance Weekends.

The purpose of Renaissance Weekend is to bring together accomplished people from a wide variety of backgrounds to hold conversations about all sorts of issues on an informal, off-the-record basis in a relaxed atmosphere. They began in 1981. The Laders heard friends lamenting that they rarely had the occasion to learn “in a personal and substantive way” from the fascinating people whom they met. So they organized the first Renaissance Weekend, which was attended by 60 families on the New Year’s weekend of January 1981. A year later, some 90 participants plus spouses and children came. Now they meet four or five times a year in various locations in the United States and, occasionally, Canada. Attendance reached 500 for the New Year’s weekend of January 1, 1989. This grew to 1,500 on January 1, 1997, and about 1,350 on January 1, 1999. Weekends at other times of the year are smaller.

Each Renaissance Weekend “seeks to build bridges across traditional divides of professions and politics, geography and generations, religions and philosophies.” The overall goal of these retreats is “to encourage personal and national renewal.” To do this, the weekends bring together “distinguished participants—CEOs, venture capitalists and entrepreneurs, Nobel laureates and Pulitzer Prize-winners, artists and scientists, astronauts and Olympians, judges, diplomats and work-at-home parents, presidents, prime ministers, professors and priests, Republicans, Democrats and Independents. Civility prevails. Partisanship is frowned upon, and commercialism is banned.” In order to emphasize the Renaissance theme; the art work on the 2004 invitation included a stylized version of Filippo Brunelleschi’s dome of the cathedral of Florence, built between 1420 and 1436, perhaps the greatest architectural and engineering feat of the Italian Renaissance.

Although important to the participants, Renaissance Weekends did not attract much attention until one of its regular attendees from the earliest years, William Jefferson Clinton, was elected president in 1992. Then the media paid attention. Clinton, usually accompanied by Hillary Rodham Clinton and daughter Chelsea, continued to attend and participate throughout his presidency. He usually attended the New Year’s weekends held at Hilton Head Island in South Carolina; that of late December 1998 through January 1, 1999, was the fifteenth for Clinton. He normally participated in one or more of the panel discussions and played golf. The weekends encourage recreational activities.

Because the conversations may not be reported, Renaissance Weekends are best known for their participants. They include former president Gerald Ford and several failed presidential candidates: the late Eugene McCarthy, the late Terry Sanford, Wesley Clark, Howard Dean, and Robert Graham. Senators and members of the House of Representatives, cabinet secretaries, and aides to presidents have attended. So have a number of Nobel laureates, MacArthur Prize and Pulitzer Prize winners, plus many other people in business, education, law, medicine, journalism, and religion.

The easiest way to describe a Renaissance Weekend is to describe my participation. First, one must be invited. Former participants are invited to nominate people for future weekends and, if Renaissance Weekend agrees, invitations are mailed to the nominees. I received an invitation in August 1999. I have no idea who nominated me. But because the invitation was sent to the address of the literary agent who represented me when I was editor in chief of Encyclopedia of the Renaissance (published 1999), it may be that
The invitation offers one the opportunity to attend one or all of the weekends in a given year. I chose to attend the Renaissance Weekend in Santa Fe, New Mexico, February 17–21, 2000. I was then asked to submit a brief curriculum vitae and statement of interests and topics about which I might like to speak. This enables the organizers to assign participants to appropriate discussion groups. Participants are encouraged to bring spouses and children; indeed, programs, excursions, and games are organized for children.

About 360 adults and 80 children, from toddlers through university students, descended on a Santa Fe hotel on February 17, 2000. Participants were almost evenly divided between men and women. The vast majority were white, a small handful were African Americans and Hispanics. Business, law, medicine, and university administration were best represented. There were many people from the world of high technology in Silicon Valley and elsewhere. CEOs of other kinds of companies, especially small ones, were also there, along with a sprinkling of venture capitalists and people from financial institutions. The academic world was well represented at the senior administrative level: several university and college presidents, deans of university units (business school, medical school, arts and sciences), and two leaders of elite private schools. By contrast, there were very few ordinary humanities professors and only two historians of Europe: myself and one from an Ivy League university. Law was well represented with five judges and a number of attorneys. So was medicine and medical research. Psychologists and psychotherapists, health care managers, as well as a few nurses who were female spouses of other participants, were part of the gathering.

There were several publishers and editors, but only two widely recognized print or television journalists: the syndicated columnist William Raspberry and Nina Totenberg, legal affairs correspondent for PBS and ABC. A few clergymen from mainline churches—Episcopal, Presbyterian, and Roman Catholic—were present, but none from more fundamentalist Christian churches. One congressman, a former astronaut, and a MacArthur fellow were there. A number of participants straddled professions (e.g., a computer expert who developed medical technology). There were many professional couples present. And women who listed “homemaker” as their occupation almost always were simultaneously involved in a business or profession or had been. Conspicuously absent were people from Hollywood, the television entertainment industry, and the worlds of sports, arts, and music, both classical and popular. Nor were any active or retired military officers in attendance.

The majority, but not all, seemed to be well-educated, reasonably affluent people with high expectations for themselves and their children, the kinds of people who send their children to private schools followed by Harvard, Yale, Princeton, or Stanford. One reason for a relatively comfortable clientele is that participants must pay registration fees, food, and lodging for four days, and transportation to and from the venue. The cost for the four to five days reaches $2,000 to $2,500 per adult and half or more of that for each child.

The program of a Renaissance Weekend is a series of conversations. Each participant is assigned to two or three panels. At Santa Fe there were about 100 panel discussions, with up to eight running simultaneously. Larger Weekends have 300 to 400 panels. They begin in the evening of the first day, resume at 8:00 a.m., and run through the day and early evening for the next three days, and conclude at midmorning of the fifth day. Each panel or group discussion has a moderator and from ten to fifteen, occasionally six to twenty, speakers.
At Santa Fe, the panels were grouped under broadly defined themes, such as Renaissance Policy, Renaissance Academy, Renaissance Advanced Management, Renaissance Education, Renaissance Families, Renaissance Law Forum, Renaissance Quest, and Renaissance Sci/Tech. The individual topics for the panel discussions included “Creating Values,” “Money Politics, Managed Care & Other Seemingly Insoluble Problems,” “Venture Capital Free-for-all,” “The 21st Century American Marriage,” “How Will We be Living in 2020?,” “The Internet’s Consequences & the Digital Divide,” and “American Cities in the New Century.” There were discussions on what has been learned about early childhood education and on aging, on surviving cancer (all panelists were either survivors or medical experts), and on spiritual life in the new millennium. Lawyers and judges discussed constitutional issues and controversial problems. There was a discussion of world hot spots. Speakers were encouraged to present arresting and stimulating ideas based on their own expertise or experience. There were only a handful of sessions on politics, and these were nonpartisan, such as a panel about the possibilities and limitations of the last year of a presidency, and another on what twentieth-century presidencies might teach twenty-first-century presidents. All discussions are off-the-record, with no recording devices allowed. Nothing anyone says may be quoted.

Some panels were light-hearted, such as the one in which speakers presented humorous wish lists if they became emperors of the world. Lifting steins of beer was the “work” in one Renaissance Workshop. Conversations continued at meals, as table leaders and themes were announced. Anyone who wanted to eat and talk at a particular table was welcome on a first-come basis. A few sessions were planned for children and young adults. For example, a twelve-year-old served as moderator for a group of six-, seven-, and eight-year-olds on the topic “The person I most admire is . . .

because . . .” Games, sports, and activities were offered to children and young adults and excursions to adults and children.

Because most sessions lasted eighty to eighty-five minutes, speakers were expected to limit their remarks to three to five minutes, in order to allow time for questions and discussion. Hence, speakers could only make one or two points. The benefits were that speakers expressed themselves clearly and concisely, while listeners were stimulated to think and to ask questions. The discussions moved briskly and were not boring. The disadvantages were that there was not enough time to develop an idea, to explain its consequences, or for members of the audience to realize objections and present counterarguments.

Any assessment of the atmosphere and style of a Renaissance Weekend can only be that of one person able to attend a limited number of panels and talk to a minority of the participants. Keeping that caution in mind, two strong themes appeared at the Santa Fe Weekend: speculation about what the twenty-first century might hold and the growing impact of the Internet on all areas of life. The first theme was natural for a meeting in February 2000, and the relatively large number of participants from the high-tech world helped project the second theme. The participants displayed a genuine curiosity to know more about the many swift changes occurring in American life.

Most participants seemed to be moderately liberal and their mood rationally optimistic. They wanted to make the world better through traditional American means: expanding knowledge, better technology, intelligent development, and reasoned small changes in public policy. They were not radicals but people prepared to work through the system. A certain amount of pragmatic do-goodism surfaced in the discussions. If a criticism might be made, it is that there was little discussion about the world beyond the borders of the United States. It is likely that much more
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discussion about the rest of the world has occurred at weekends after September 2001.

I encountered only a handful of political conservatives at the Santa Fe meeting, which seems to be the pattern. The Web site list of Renaissance Weekend participants from government and politics over the past twenty years includes very few recognizable conservative figures, such as political commentator Norman Ornstein of the American Enterprise Institute, former Republican senator from Wyoming Alan Simpson, and Richard Viguerie, conservative direct mail impresario and editor of Conservative Digest. Many more individuals with Democratic links are listed.

The small number of conservative participants has led conservatives to criticize Renaissance Weekend for its alleged liberal and Democratic bias. For example, the managing editor of National Review, the very conservative political opinion journal founded by William Buckley Jr., accepted an invitation to attend a Renaissance Weekend in 2004. He then reported on his experience. He complimented the Ladders for their kindness, hospitality, and ecumenism. But then he portrayed his fellow participants as ill-mannered liberals who hissed and shook their heads when he spoke and had a visceral hatred for George W. Bush. (I did not see this kind of behavior in February 2000, but that now seems like an earlier historical age.) He then launched his own message, which was to lambaste National Public Radio, PBS, The New York Times, and ABC news anchor Peter Jennings as cornerstones of a biased liberal press, and to view Bush as a latter-day Abraham Lincoln. It does not appear that this attempt of the Ladders to reach out to conservatives for civil conversation succeeded.

Renaissance Weekends have a broad appeal. Possibly the most important reason for attending is the opportunity to listen to and meet informally accomplished people, some of them newsworthy, from different professions and areas of life. Another reason is to hear new ideas. A third motivation is to gain a little inside knowledge, for example, to hear Nina Totenberg’s anecdotes about members of the Supreme Court. Networking opportunities probably attract some participants. And the combination of intellectual stimulation and family vacation that Renaissance Weekends offer persuades some to return year after year. For those with the interest, time, and money, Renaissance Weekends are attractive.

The small group of aristocratic men and women who spent long evenings conversing about the issues that mattered to them in a palace in 1506 and the accomplished, affluent, and articulate Americans who meet in hotels in vacation areas of the United States share some similarities. Although the former did not discuss social problems or the impact of technology, the urge to hold civil conversations transcends time and distance.

Living Last Suppers

Another way to relive the Renaissance is to reenact its most famous religious painting in order to inspire religious devotion. Between 1495 and 1497, Leonardo da Vinci painted the Last Supper. The painting, some fifteen by twenty-nine feet, is on the wall of the refectory (the room in which the friars ate their meals) in the Dominican monastery of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan. The painting is about the Last Supper, the meal in which Jesus and his disciples celebrated the Passover meal the night before he was crucified. At the Last Supper, Jesus instituted the Eucharist, the commemorative eating of bread and drinking of wine that celebrates the union of Christians with Jesus. The Eucharist is a major part of the theology and liturgy of Christian churches, although each gives it different definition and meaning. This gathering of Jesus and his twelve apostles is remembered throughout the Christian world on Holy or Maundy Thursday, which is the day before the crucifixion and three days before Easter.
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But Leonardo did not depict this most solemn theological moment of the Last Supper. Rather, he painted the scene of consternation when Jesus told his disciples that one of them would betray him. The apostles were greatly distressed and immediately began to ask, "Is it I, Lord?" while simultaneously affirming that they could not possibly betray him and wondering whom it could be (Matthew 26:20–25; Mark 14:17–19). Leonardo's painting captures this dramatic moment. The thirteen figures are carefully balanced in a dramatic setting. Jesus sits calmly in the center, while the apostles in four groups of three are agitatedly gesturing and talking. Judas is the fourth figure on the right of Jesus (the viewer's left), the only one not displaying emotion. His face is partly in shadow, perhaps indicating that he was no longer in the light of Christ. With its three-dimensional interior space, table set with dishes, walls and ceiling, and landscape seen through the windows, the painting handles complicated perspective issues brilliantly. Most important, Leonardo pays careful attention to expressions and gestures, which seem to illuminate the inner thoughts of each apostle. The painting is a tour de force in composition and expression.

Unfortunately, the painting began deteriorating almost immediately as a result of Leonardo's experimental techniques. The painting is not a fresco, in which paint is applied quickly to wet plaster. This would have required Leonardo to work quickly and without revising, something he never did. Rather, he painted in fits and starts, was constantly retouching, and often left paintings unfinished. In order to avoid making it a fresco, Leonardo applied a base made of various materials on the wall, then painted on this base. Unfortunately, Leonardo's experiment did not work. The paint began to chip and flake almost immediately. Repainting in later centuries made matters worse, although a restoration completed in 1999 has recovered some of its former beauty. Despite physical decay, the Last Supper is the best known religious painting of the Renaissance, perhaps of all time, and has been reproduced countless times.

Although the Last Supper was painted more than 500 years ago, it is a living work of art, because it is constantly being re-created. Numerous American Protestant churches re-create the Last Supper with members of the congregation. A far from exhaustive Internet search reveals that Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, and nondenominational Protestant churches in California, Illinois, Minnesota, Nebraska, North Carolina, Texas, Virginia, and the island of Okinawa have created Last Supper dramas or tableaus in 2003 and 2004. Some of these churches have been doing so annually for up to twenty years. No doubt many other churches present Last Supper reenactments but do not post pictures on their Web sites or have no Web sites.

Supper dramas may take an hour or more. Participants usually follow texts written for these presentations. The Rev. Ernest K. Emurian of Las Vegas, author of many religious dramas, wrote one that is often used, but there are others. Overall, Living Last Suppers are part of a centuries-old tradition of dramatizing stories from the New and Old Testaments that began in the Middle Ages. Living Last Suppers continue that tradition with the help of the most famous religious painting of the Renaissance.

It is believed that Leonardo modeled the faces in his painting from living people, a common practice of Renaissance artists. This has led to the creation of a pious legend of uncertain origin that appears in almost identical form at several church Web sites. According to the story, Leonardo sought a model for the face of Jesus before turning to the other faces. After much searching, he found a young man of nineteen whose face radiated the innocence appropriate for the Son of God. Leonardo made the young man’s face the face of Jesus. Leonardo then turned to the apostles. After seven years’ labor (an exaggeration, because the painting was done in about three years), he was at an impasse. He had not been able to find anyone whose face was so marked by evil as to serve as the face of Judas. Then he heard about a hardened criminal awaiting execution for murder and other crimes in the dungeons of Rome. Leonardo went to Rome to see him and concluded that this vicious, depraved man had a countenance so evil that he could serve as the model for Judas who betrayed Jesus. He had him transported to Milan, where Leonardo copied his face into the painting. When he finished, the prisoner cried out, “Leonardo, don’t you recognize me?” Leonardo stared at him intently and shook his head. He had never seen the man before meeting him in a Roman dungeon. The prisoner cried again, “Oh, God, have I fallen so low?” He then told Leonardo, “I am the same man you painted just seven years ago as the figure of Christ.” His life of crime had so changed him that not even the amazingly keen eye of the painter recognized him. The
story concludes with the moral that a life of sin and crime can change a perfectly innocent man into “the most traitorous character ever known in the history of the world.”

By contrast, Giorgio Vasari tells a more light-hearted story about the faces in his Lives of the Artists (1550; second edition 1568). The prior of the monastery was exasperated by Leonardo’s slow pace, as the painter often spent half a day contemplating the painting without lifting his brush. The prior complained to the duke of Milan, who then called on Leonardo to explain in the presence of the prior why he was so slow. Leonardo answered that his inability to paint the heads of Jesus and Judas held him up. For the former, he was not looking for a human model, because no human could shine forth the divinity of Jesus. As for Judas, he was finding it very difficult to find any human being so depraved that he could betray the creator of the world. He would keep searching. But if he could not find someone, he would use the face of the prior as the model for Judas. The duke roared with laughter, and the prior bothered Leonardo no longer.

The Last Supper has only men in it, which has led feminists to use the painting as a way of drawing attention to the slighting of female artists. In 1971, the American artist Mary Beth Edelson created a poster with her version of the Last Supper and called it “Some Living American Women Artists/Last Supper.” Using Leonardo’s room, table, and background, it shows a female “Jesus” seated in the center with twelve female artists in the same poses and gestures of the twelve apostles. The border of the painting adds the faces of many other American female artists. An advertisement selling reproductions of the poster states that “The intention (of the poster) was to identify and commemorate women artists who were receiving little recognition at that time, as well as to tweak the nose of patriarchal religion for cutting women out of positions of power and authority.” A book makes a similar argument. Who Cooked the Last Supper? The Women’s History of the World by Rosalind Miles (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001) seeks to overturn “the phallus of history” and to celebrate the works and lives of women throughout history.

It is likely that the participants in Renaissance Weekends and Living Last Suppers come from different segments of American society. But like those who attend Renaissance Faires, they try to relive aspects of the Renaissance that they admire.