Italian Social Classes of the Renaissance

The people of Renaissance Florence, like most city–states of the era, were composed of four social classes: the nobles, the merchants, the tradesmen and the unskilled workers.

The nobles lived on large estates outside the city walls. They owned most of the city's land, so the nobles controlled. The nobles served as military officers, royal advisers and as politicians.

Baldassare Castiglione described the proper manners of a noble in The Book of the Courtier (1528). Castiglione wrote that a noble must have training to be an able warrior and social talents such as wit, the ability to dance, and "a certain grace that makes all his activities seem effortless and unconscious."

The nobles were disdainful of the merchant class, who gained wealth in industries like wool processing, shipbuilding and banking. The merchants sought to protect their wealth by controlling the government and marrying into noble families. They became patrons of great artists in order to gain public favor.

The tradesmen of Florence were the crafts workers and shopkeepers. Most tradesmen belonged to guilds, organizations that established standards of quality, set rules for membership, and limited outside competition.

The unskilled workers were the lowest class of city workers. These laborers did not have job protection and were very dependent on their employers. Workers who violated rules could have their wages withheld or could be discharged from their jobs.

As difficult as their lives were, however, the unskilled urban workers were better off than the peasants who lived in rural areas. The poorest of the peasants were the sharecroppers who worked on land owned by nobles. Life on peasant farms was very difficult, and starvation was common.

The social classes of became less distinct as the Renaissance progressed. Humanist ideas led to increased rights for individuals, but the class system remained in place in Florence and throughout most of Europe long after the end of the Renaissance.

Fill in the Blanks

The people of F_____ were composed of f_____ social c_____ during the R_____. The n_____ lived on huge e_____ outside the c_____ walls. They behaved according to the rules of c_____ and d_____ the newly r_____ merchants. The m_____ gained w_____ in i_____ like b_____, w_____ processing, and *s_____ building. The m_____ sought to p_____ their w_____ by c_____ the g_____ and m_____ into n_____ families. They g_____ public *a__p__o__a__ by patronizing great a_____. Shopkeepers and p_____ composed the m_____ class of Florence. Most of the people of F_____ belonged to the lowest c_____: the w_____. Life for the workers was very difficult. With no job p_____, they could easily be d_____ from their jobs. While life was grueling for the *u__b__n workers, they were better off than the p_____ who lived in r_____ areas.

Answer in Complete Sentences

*Do you think the merchants fit the ancient Roman definition of patrician?

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