Toward the end of the Middle Ages, a great flowering of culture called the Renaissance began in Italy. In this chapter, you will learn about the Renaissance and how it began.

Renaissance is a French word that means “rebirth.” Historians use the word to describe the rebirth of widespread interest in classical art and learning that took place in Europe from about 1300 to about 1600 C.E. “Classical” refers to the cultures of ancient Greece and Rome. Although there was no sudden end to the Middle Ages, the Renaissance changed many aspects of people’s lives over time.

Medieval European society was based on feudalism. Most people lived on feudal manors. The Roman Catholic Church encouraged people to think more about life after death than about daily life on Earth. Except for the clergy, few people were educated.
By the Late Middle Ages, changes were occurring that paved the way for the Renaissance. Trade and commerce increased. Cities grew larger and wealthier. Newly wealthy merchants and bankers supported the growth of arts and learning. A renewed interest in ancient cultures started a flood of new ideas. Greek and Roman examples inspired new styles of architecture, approaches to the arts, and ways of thinking.

Beginning in Italy, a philosophy called humanism developed. Humanists believed in the worth and potential of all individuals. They balanced religious faith with belief in the power of the mind. Humanists took a fresh interest in human society and the natural world. This thinking contributed to the burst of creativity during the Renaissance.

In this chapter, you will explore how the Renaissance differed from the Middle Ages and classical times. Then you will examine some changes in European life that led to the Renaissance.