



By 1338, Florence was one of the four largest cities in Europe with a population of over 100 000.

# How Did the City-State of Florence Reflect the Renaissance Worldview?

## Political and Economic Systems

Florence, or *Firenza* in Italian, developed as a city-state in north-central Italy. It was built on the Arno River, which had been a trade route for centuries. Merchants and traders had prospered in Florence since before the Roman Empire, but during the Renaissance, as trade increased, it became the centre of highly successful bankers and silk and wool merchants. The wealthy bankers supported the pope in Rome; in return, he gave them the financial business of the papacy.

Through their banking and business dealings, Florentines met people from other societies and cultures. They were exposed to new ideas and knowledge that eventually spread to the rest of western Europe.

Florence was the richest of the city-states and became so wealthy that it bought surrounding cities such as Lucca, Arezzo, and Livorno from their rulers. In this way, Florentines extended power and control over more and more of the region.

Like most other Italian city-states, Florence began as a republic, but did not last because of power struggles among various groups. By 1435, one powerful family, the Medici, took control of the city. Under their leadership, Florence became the centre of the Renaissance in Italy.

*Carta della Catena*, Italian school, 1490. Panoramic view of Florence and River Arno. Map of Florence during the 15th century — the Golden Age. The hilly terrain surrounding Florence was not good for farming, but perfect for raising sheep. As a result, the city became a natural centre for wool and cloth industries.



## Social Systems

Although Florentine society was based on a class system, as the merchant class became wealthier, they were able to move up the social ladder and gain status in the community. People in the merchant class were called the *popolo grasso* (the fat people). They organized themselves into **guilds**, which represented the wool manufacturers and wool finishers, silk merchants, and bankers. Guilds were similar to today's unions or professional organizations. Workers and shopkeepers were called *popolo minuto* (the little people). Most of the workers had been peasants who had moved to the city to work in the fabric industries. They were not allowed to be members of the guilds. The nobles, or upper class, still owned most of the land and continued to live on estates outside the city.

## Culture

When the Medici family became the leaders of Florence, the city-state became a major centre of Renaissance culture.

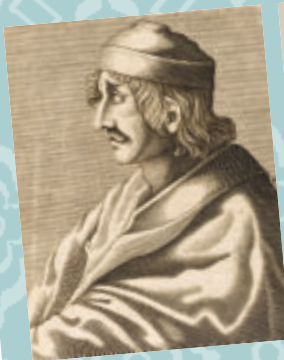
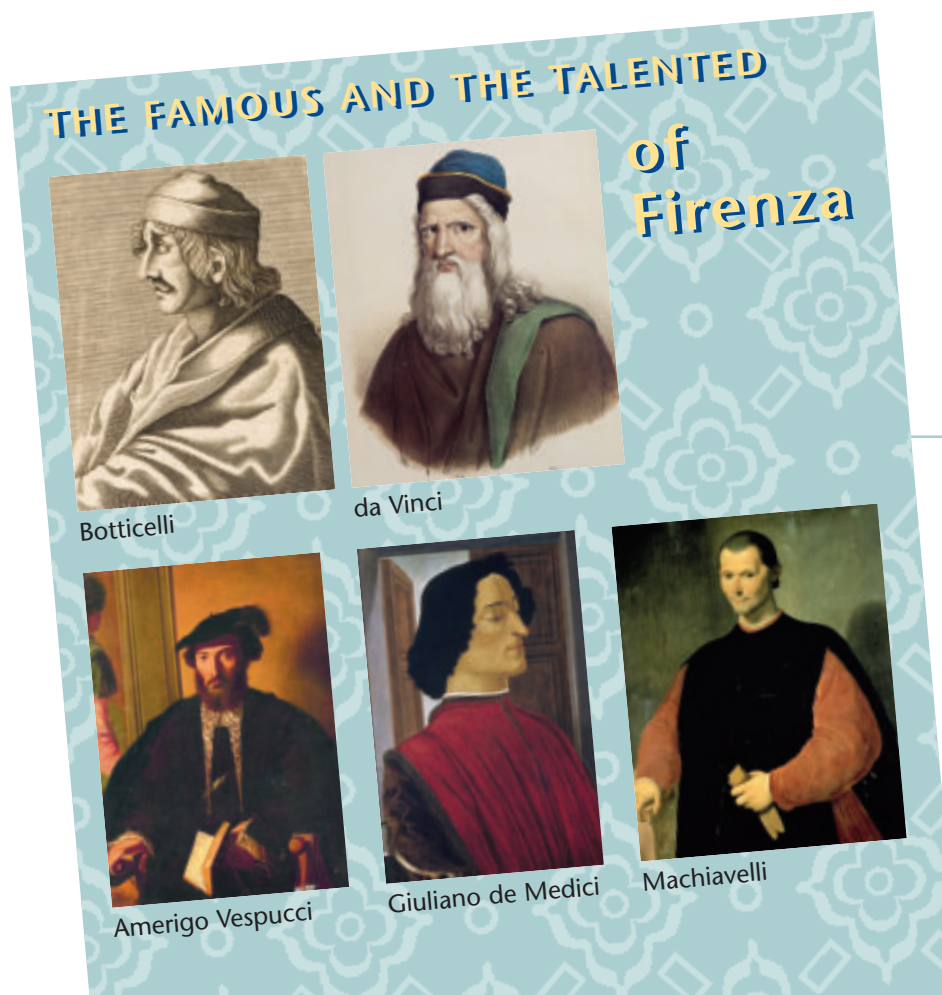
They supported artists, architects, and scholars developing a city rich in works of art, architectural marvels, and scholarly thought. Ideals of citizenship were promoted and those with wealth and power believed they had a responsibility to carry out positive civic works.

**guild:** an organization of craftsmen or merchants

The florin was one of the first gold coins produced in western Europe and led to the use of money, rather than bartering (exchanging one product for another product), for purchasing items. Because Florence's banking families were so powerful and influential, and because the coin was of such high-grade gold, the florin became the standard currency of Europe during the early Renaissance.



*I wonder ... is there a standard currency used around the world today?*



Botticelli



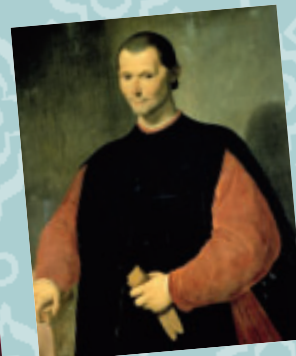
da Vinci



Amerigo Vespucci



Giuliano de Medici



Machiavelli

Alessandro Botticelli, painter

Leonardo da Vinci,  
Renaissance man

Amerigo Vespucci,  
explorer and cartographer

Giuliano de Medici,  
statesman and patron

Niccolò Machiavelli,  
political philosopher