

PERSPECTIVES ON HISTORY

Whose History Is Recorded in History Books and Other Records?

Through whose eyes do we see the history of a period such as the Renaissance?

For the most part, the history that is recorded is that of the powerful and the rich. The names and exploits of the rulers — the kings and queens and presidents and premiers — are the ones that will be found in the official records of a society. Monuments and statues record their likenesses. It is through their viewpoints, and those of the writers and artists who record their lives and aims and ambitions, that we most often see history.

Before the Renaissance, almost all the historical records of western Europe were of the aristocracy and Church officials. During the Renaissance, a wealthy merchant class grew, gained power, and learned to read and write. They could afford to have portraits painted of themselves and their families, and they could write journals. Many of these paintings and writings remain today for historians to study.

In the Middle Ages and early Renaissance, the stories of women, the young, the poor, and the powerless were rarely recorded in print or in artwork. The names of common people were sometimes listed in records of births, baptisms, marriages, and deaths. Some documents listed details of their landholdings and taxes. Other details were recorded in court and legal documents. Today, through the study of these records and artifacts found in archaeological digs, we are beginning to find out about the lives of the common people during the Renaissance and what they might have believed about the events occurring around them.

Perspectives on History examines sources and documents from which historical information is obtained. It explores the group perspectives and personal points of view from which events were recorded.



Marchese Ludovico Gonzaga III of Mantua, his wife Barbara of Brandenburg, children, courtiers, and dog Rubino, from the *Cameradegei Sposi* fresco in Palazzo Ducale, Andrea Mantegna, 1465–1474. Ludovico Gonzaga (1414–1478) was another patron of the arts who lived in Mantua, Italy. The Gonzaga family ruled over Mantua, which was one of the smaller city-states. It had a population of about 40 000. Gonzaga hired Andrea Mantegna, one of Italy's treasured artists, as his court painter. What kind of society do you see in this portrait by Mantegna?