Love and Marriage in Renaissance Italy

Engagement, marriage, child birth. What was it like to experience these milestones during Renaissance Italy? Exploring the arts that celebrate family life during that period, provides fascinating insights not only into this aspect of society, but into Italian Renaissance culture in general -- at least among the upper classes who could afford the sumptuous treasures now found only in museums.

An impressive exhibit mounted by the Metropolitan Museum of New York City provides an enlightening and often amusing journey back to Renaissance Italy, the place and time of Sandro Botticelli and Leonardo Da Vinci, roughly 1450 to 1620. On display are more than 150 objects including paintings, glassware, jewels, pottery (majolica) that were created to celebrate or to mark engagement, marriage, and birth.

The Riches of Florence and Rome

Let me set the scene. The streets of Florence are narrow and twisty but the buildings of the new merchant princes are magnificent, inside and out. Think of the Medici family and their worldwide empire, their aspirations to marry into the great houses of Europe and to acquire immense wealth. Over the centuries they were to achieve both.

You can see the fruits of their efforts even now, some five centuries after the Renaissance in the Uffizi (the office), a Florentine palace -- now a museum -- where the Medici hung the luminous works of Italy’s Renaissance master painters and stored their sculptures. These included some of Europe’s most famous works of art: “The Birth of Venus” by Sandro Botticelli (1465-1510) presenting the exquisite model Simonetta Vespucci arriving on a half shell. She is greeted by, among others, a red-haired maiden representing Spring. There is Leonardo da Vinci’s (1452-1519) sensitive “Announciation;” and Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio’s (a.k.a. Caravaggio, 1571-1610) “Bacchus,” the god of wine and mirth in all his glory.

Not to be outdone by the Medici, Rome boasted equally illustrious patricians, in particular the Barbarinis and the Borgheses. Princes, popes and cardinals from both families continued to shine on Renaissance horizons for centuries.

But Was It Love?

Looking at portraits of engaged couples of the period, you might well be surprised at their youthful appearance. In fact, teen marriages were quite routine. If you remember your Shakespeare, Juliet was only 14 when she married Romeo in Friar Lawrence’s cell. Many boys and girls were married at similarly early ages during the Italian Renaissance.

A good reason for early marriage was fear of early death. This was a time, after all, of primitive medical care and ignorance of basic sanitation and its role in preventing disease. Antibiotics, vaccines, and other health care tools taken for granted today did not exist. Epidemics, most notably the black plague, regularly decimated the European population. Large families had a better chance of surviving its effects; the younger the bride, the more children she would be able to bear during her reproductive lifespan, and the more likely some would survive to carry on family dynasties. Marriages did take place at later ages, as well, but typically under circumstances when great wealth was not a factor or when division of property would not cause a hardship to either party.

Some of these young marriages were arranged in haste -- the result of impulse or the impatience of passion. But far more often, marriages were not for love, but for attaining strategic alliances that elevated power or wealth. Marriages were arranged between families with go-betweens negotiating the best possible financial and social terms.

Impalamento: The Negotiation

It was usually up to the parents of the prospective bride and groom to make the arrangements for an impending wedding. Marriage brokers were usually brought in and the two parties decided on what formalities would take place.
An agreement would be confirmed in writing, specifying exactly what the dowry would be and how all transfers of property were to be handled. At this point the prospective couple might meet, if it were convenient and they were lucky, but often contact was only balcony to balcony. Once this meeting of sorts was concluded in a satisfactory manner, the potential groom -- laden with presents for his intended bride and her family -- visited the bride’s home.

**Sponsalia: The Sponsorship**

Sometime after the “impalamento,” a “sponsalia” would take place. This was a meeting between only the male members of the families, who went over the contract arrangements and asked for assurances on the part of both families that the terms were realistic and equitable. Although the bride would not be present at this strictly ceremonial meeting it was assumed that she would assent to its terms and conditions. Supposedly she would not be forced to go through with the arrangements should she not have found them suitable, although the pressure to accept a financially desirable or status-boosting arrangement must have been overwhelming.

**Matrimonium**

Marriage did not take place in a church, but more often in the bride’s home, before a notary. After all the parties were satisfied that every requirement was met, a ring was placed on the bride’s finger. The Sunday following the “matrimonium” the couple would have the actual ceremony, surprisingly not in the church itself but on the church’s steps.
The Renaissance Portrait

In arranged royal marriages, portrait paintings took on very important roles. Ambassadors would travel far, then report back to court with portraits of possible candidates for marriage.

Men also relied on portraits of their intended, to decide if they wanted to go through with a proposed arrangement, since the two potential parties were often separated by great distances. Of course, factors other than appearance also came into the mix. Accomplishments, voice and musical ability, popularity in the country of residence were other important considerations. Then, if all parties were in accord, a wedding would take place, with the bride and groom sometimes meeting for the first time on that very day. We can assume that the portraits were flattering, and guess that there were some disappointed brides and grooms when they actually saw their intended.

When you look at the portraits, you’ll notice that young, single women wore their hair long. Once married they wore their hair short or styled off the neck, often covered by a Juliet cap of velvet and satin. Rectangular necklines and soft shoulders were preferred. Gowns were flared and always loose-fitting. Even in summer, ladies wore gowns of heavy velvet. Their shoes were generally flat-heeled slippers, velvet, or at times made of leather. Boys and man wore flared doublets, cloth caps and fitted leggings.

Jewelry and other adornments were of great importance. Diamonds and pearls were in fashion, decorating rings, necklaces and medallions. Frequently jewelers were inspired by plant and animal objects for their designs. Birds, especially doves were favorites. Rose and lily motifs appear frequently in the jewelry creations of the Renaissance.

And here we have another important role for portrait paintings. Without official recordings of marriages -- there were no government offices of vital records -- and with the vulnerability of the papers on which negotiations and agreements were written, paintings became valuable proof that the marriage took place. Likewise, costly jewels and clothing worn by the bride, and sometimes the groom in their portraits, were evidence of provenance and possession. Unfortunately for the bride, these possessions were never really hers, but belonged to her father and became the property of her husband at the time of the wedding.
Renaissance Games

The Florentines were excitable and emotional, and delighted in games of chance; they gave free play to their thought in movement or gesture, and engaged naturally in the production of drama; above all they were musical, and made playing on sweet-toned instruments and singing their favorite pastime during the Renaissance. Games of chance, leading to the vice of gambling, were developed to such a degree that no civil law could suppress them, and no moral teaching persuaded people to leave it. Even before the Renaissance period, in 1376, there was a law prohibiting the game of Naibi, which was played with painted cards, but the method of playing seems now to be lost. Among the by-laws of an ancient company, still preserved, is one which forbids the brethren to play with dice or naibi.

Even wealth and culture did not keep men from the evil habit, as is illustrated by the case of Buonaccorso Pitti, who occupied some of the highest posts of honor in Florence, and wrote a history of his own time. He traveled through a large part of Europe, gambling everywhere; and by his talents and affable manners made himself acceptable at numerous courts, including those of France and Burgundy. At one time he was master of the horse to the Duke of Orleans, who was assassinated November 23, 1407. On that day Pitti wrote in his diary, "I made a hundred gold florins to-day by a bargain in wool,"—thus showing that even in the midst of such a tragedy his spirit of speculation was active. He finally returned to Florence with a fortune, which was largely the product of his gaming. The money amassed in this manner was that which enabled his son Luca Pitti to acquire almost the first place in the state, and in his pride to commence building the famous Pitti palace, which was destined to become not a private, but a ducal, and finally a royal residence.

The gaming continued through all the epoch of the Renaissance. Games of cards like Frussi were much in favour, and it still continues to be played under the name of Primiera. In this game four cards are dealt to each player, and he who receives four of a kind wins the stakes. Lorenzo de' Medici refers to this game in one of his carnival songs, and speaks of it as maledetto or cursed; and advises him who wants to play to go into it very slowly, and stake but little and sparingly. He adds moreover, that in his day it was played by everybody, even by the peasants. Another game was the one called Bassetta, and was played by the dealer laying three cards on the table, and allowing each of the others to draw a card from the pack, with the chance, which was very small, of being able to match one of those already exposed. With these vices, the Florentines evidently combined the greater one of cheating; for in the Song of the Players reference is made to loaded dice and false cards.

But there were also nobler Renaissance games as well, in which skill and strength were the elements of victory, not chance or cheating. One of the favorites among these was called Pallone. It was played with a ball of good size, filled with air, and struck by the fist from one to the other; the object being for each player not to let the ball come to rest on his side of the field. Among the Renaissance games, Maglio was much beloved. It was a game of ball, which was played with a wooden ball and mallet. The ground devoted to this sport was on the east side of the church of San Marco, extending thence to the city wall. One player would challenge the others to knock the ball to a certain spot at a distance; and the winner was he who succeeded in placing the ball nearest the goal. The goal however was generally fixed at such a distance that only the one or two most expert players could drive the ball so far. This game was introduced into Florence...
about the year 1480, and was played with passion for the remainder of the century; but the Medici became dukes, and, lovers of less rough sport, prohibited its indulgence. Reference to it is also made in one of the carnival songs, where there is mention of the stiff backbone, good sight, and strong arms which are necessary to play it well.

Lovers of football will be pleased to know that it was one of the favorite Renaissance games which was also played at Florence during the days of republican rule, and was not prohibited at the incoming of the ducal regime. One of the preferred pastimes of the young men of the early part of the 16th Century was to have a band of music seated on the ridge of the roof of the noble church of Santa Croce and play, while twenty-five whites and twenty-five greens did battle for the football goal on the piazza. This game was called Calcio, a name preserved until this very day (every weekend I watch the Serie A calcio games!). And one day while they were carrying on their fun as above mentioned, someone, evidently horrified by the godlessness of the musical accompaniment from such a position, shot at the musicians, however, without hitting any of them.

Another darling of the Renaissance games was chess. It was played in Florence at least as early as the beginning of the 14th Century; for there is record of that date of the murder of a certain Brunelleschi, while engaged in the game.

A game of strength and skill was Pome, and was for a time held in high esteem. It consisted in throwing a spear, while running, at a suspended apple.

From this partial enumeration we may conclude that the Renaissance games were offering people an agreeable pastime. They made people exercise, and they instilled energy, independence, and manhood.

Somersaults, 16th Century
Renaissance Weapons

It is the amazing development of arts and science which is best defining the Renaissance. Weapons and war are completing the picture of a still warlike epoch, when, at times, even the greatest artists had to use their creativity for war related purposes. Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo are the best known examples.

Many of the medieval weapons were still in service during the Renaissance. Weapons like the Guisarme, the Halberd, the Mace, the Partisan are already known to those studying the medieval weapons.

The Guisarme may be claimed with all confidence to be one of the most ancient of weapons, as its first inception occurred in the Bronze Period, and from that remote age down to the 17th Century it was more or less in evidence. It terminated generally in an extremely strong and sharp point; the two sides were approximately parallel, and both brought to a keen and almost razor-like edge, while a hook was provided a short way down the blade. The blade lent itself to elaborate ornamentations and many examples of the 16th and 17th centuries exhibit splendid specimens of engraving. It was used in England as late as the battle of Flodden (1513).

Brought in the field by the Swiss, the Halberd was maybe the most popular of the Renaissance weapons, as illustrated by the splendid 16th Century equipment of the Vatican Swiss Guard. It was also the weapon offering the most exquisite examples of ornamentation, especially those designed for parade purposes. This weapon essentially consists of an axe-blade balanced by a pick, the head of the shaft being prolonged in the shape of a spike. The spike underwent changes, broadening and flattening at times until it presented a blade-like aspect, which was often curved downwards towards the shaft. It was essentially a weapon for the foot soldier, and although it is occasionally seen with a very long shaft, these are for pageant purposes, the war weapon seldom exceeding five or six feet in length. The halberd became obsolete when the pike came into favor.

The Partisan was introduced into England in the middle of the 14th Century, and from the 15th to the 17th centuries was used extensively on the Continent, but especially in France. It consists of a long double-edged blade, wide at the base, where it is provided with projections of various forms, hooked, crescent, and tapering to a point. It is always symmetrical, both sides balancing in form. The Ranseur and the Spetum are modifications of the partisan.

The Pike was much appreciated among the Renaissance weapons. It was one of the simplest of weapons, being merely a long, narrow, lance-like head of steel strengthened by lengthy strips of metal, which ran for a considerable distance down the pole, rendering it almost immune from sword-cuts. The length of the weapon varied considerably, from over twenty feet to less than ten, but the latter was the usual length. For resisting a cavalry charge the base of the pike was fixed into the ground, an iron shoe or point being provided to protect that part. The long strips of steel down the shaft may be considered one of its special features, as it could not be put out of action by any ordinary cuts of the sword or axe.

The Glaive had a convex, broad cutting blade. Hooks, spurs, and other projections appear upon the base of the blade. This weapon was more in use upon the Continent than in
England, chiefly in France and Germany, and did not become obsolete until the beginning of the 17th Century. The term "glaive" may be applied to a simple shaft weapon bearing any resemblance to a knife blade.

The Mace, already used by the Normans and Saxons at Hastings, did not disappear until the 16th Century. It has undergone many changes of form, being at times of cog-wheel shape, oval, globular or dentated, but the general form was that of radiating flanges surrounding a central head. The knob was at times of lead, and some maces are furnished with a spike, as a prolongation of the shaft. In the 16th Century, the mace was the characteristic weapon of the sergeant-at-arms. The royal arms were stamped upon the shaft at the termination of the grip: this end became in consequence the important part of the weapon; the ornaments and guards augmented and developed, while the end furnished with the knob shrank into insignificance. Finally the mace was reversed; the arms now appear upon the upper end of the shaft in all corporation and other maces.
Childhood in the Renaissance

The harshness of family life greatly affected children. Children especially were susceptible to disease and death. Several children in a prosperous merchant or noble family might die of illness in childhood. However, in a peasant family, those children who survived childhood were extremely lucky. A young peasant mother may be lucky to end up with one grown child after years of childbirth. In addition, mothers and fathers often died by the time they reached thirty, leaving children without one or both parents. Babies whose parents could not afford to keep them and babies who were born to slave mothers in wealthy houses might be left at orphanages where they would be cared for by wet nurses.

As a result, death of children and adults was considered to be a matter of fate and happened so frequently that it was considered normal. Montaigne, who lived in the seventeenth century, was quoted by Michel Pierre as writing, "I have lost two or three suckling children, not without regret, but without being much disturbed."

Children were generally miniatures of their parents, and were expected to dress, talk, and act as adults. The only difference between adults and children was that children had no rights. In some cases, children could be bought and sold by parents to make money. If the child were a peasant, they would be working in the fields or the kitchen as soon as possible. Middle class children whose parents were artisans or merchants would begin to learn their parent's trade as soon as possible. Noble sons were trained to become warriors and courtiers, and noble daughters learned to be accomplished and attractive in order to procure a profitable marriage arrangement for their families.

However, in the south of Europe and among the wealthy, the situation for children was a bit different. According to Charles L. Mee, Jr., "Children were meant to play, to be shielded from the worries and harshnesses of the grown-up world, and to work hard at their studies in preparation for the time when their presumably carefree days would end." This observation, which can be observed starting in the nobility, was part of a trend that was spreading throughout all of Europe during the Renaissance. It was the formation of the modern family. Though this change swept through the privileged class, not much changed for peasant families. The struggle and harsh lifestyle of the peasants gave them little time to worry about others.

In the middle and upper classes, regard toward children grew during the Renaissance. According to Michel Pierre, "One sign of this change was that in religious paintings the infant Jesus took on the features of a real child, whereas before he was always given the severe face of an adult, sometimes even a face with wrinkles." In Italy during the Renaissance, letters between husbands and wives often spoke of children, both their own and others, with warmth and affection.

Education during the Renaissance became increasingly more important and popular. Noble children often attended four to six hours of school per day and went to work or to a university at age fifteen. Usually, education started around age seven, though often younger. Upper-class girls might be sent to convents for education until either her family found her a husband or she became a nun, saving her family the expense of a dowry.

A boy's education was more extensive. A boy's education was either by a governor, college, or a tutor at home. Students, primarily in Italy, were often taught grammar and arithmetic because those were the tools of a merchant. However, privileged families such as the Medici family had their children instructed in Latin, Greek, logic, and philosophy. Boys everywhere learned a little Latin, philosophy, and rhetoric as part of a good education. If attending a school, a boy faced harsh
discipline, long hours, and bad food among other uncomfortable factors of everyday life. Along with this formal education, a noble boy was taught the ways of warrior and courtier, which included riding, swordsmanship, dancing, and the arts of war.

Peasants were usually completely uneducated, stripping away from them one of the key factors in social mobility. Artisans would be educated through an apprenticeship or at home, although it was possible for a boy to attend a cathedral school to become a member of the clergy.

Marriage for noble children was usually very early as a result of the child's obligation to gain power and prosperity for their family and produce heirs to continue dynasties. In lower classes, a man did not marry until they had obtained land or established themselves in a trade. Women of those classes usually waited until their families could raise a proper dowry before they married. Women were usually significantly younger than the men they married.
Women were primarily bearers and rearers of kids, keeping domestic hearth, subordinate inferiors of men; custom and prejudice kept them at home. Duties of women were varied and arduous. Only a few wealthy women escaped these tasks which included making clothes from scratch and administrating most of the food production. After the 13th century, women were no longer responsibly for as much of the production of basic supplies because each of these productions became individual male trades. In the Renaissance, women remained active only in carding and spinning wool. Small shops in master craftsman’s home were moved to larger shops in a different location, removing the wife from participation in the business while keeping the house. Historians believe women filled a greater variety of professional roles, had more responsibilities, and had more economic contribution during the Middle Ages rather than the Renaissance. This is because capitalism made production of goods more efficient, reducing women's economic significance. Women were paid less for same jobs which meant that more women were unemployed.

Women who could not marry or lacked the dowry required to become nuns had to find work. Before the 15th century women could join craft guilds, but after that point craft guilds began to exclude women. Women could be wool merchants, cutlers, leatherworkers, butchers, ironmongers, gloves, bookbinders, or goldsmiths. Sometimes, the wife of craftsman was good enough to supervise the shop or take it over when her husband was dead. Sometimes guild regulations, particularly in northern Europe, treated a wife as business partner with the right to inherit and continue the business. Wives of highly skilled professions such as painters, sculptors, and goldsmiths rarely took over the business because the jobs required long apprenticeship and a high degree of technical accomplishment.

Paolo da Certaldo, ca. 1320 said, "If the child be a girl she should be put to sew and not to read, for it is not good that a woman should know how to read, unless you wish her to become a nun." The role of women, mostly upper class, placed crippling limitations on developing artistic or intellectual skills a woman might possess. Women had less freedom of movement in lower classes, they were always handicapped by the physical strains and dangers of constant childbearing and by endless hard labor to provide for family.

However, fathers and husbands who stood to profit from the careers of their daughters and wives were not likely to oppose them. However, this was not a very common situation.
In the earliest years of theatres, they were built outside the city limits, as they were not allowed within the city walls. In addition, this way the city governors had no jurisdiction over them. In 1576 the first theatre building was constructed. It was erected by James Burbage (father of Richard Burbage), and was aptly named "The Theatre". It was an enclosed wooden structure built in Finsbury Fields, outside London.

Main Features:

A typical Elizabethan unroofed public playhouse, firstly had a raised platform as a stage, and on three sides of this was a yard, an open area for standing audience members. Surrounding the stage and the yard were two or three gallery levels fully furnished with seats. Behind the stage was a back wall with 2 or 3 doors (or curtained doorways). These doorways provided the actors exits and entrances from backstage. A gallery, where musicians often sat, supported the back wall. Above this gallery was a tower, which acted as a storage area for machinery. From the top of this tower, a trumpet would signal a play's commencement and a flag would indicate that a performance was taking place.

The stage and its surroundings adopted the Spanish theatre's architectural backdrop. Above the stage was a canopy, on whose ceiling a blue sky with golden stars was painted. This canopy was suitably called the "heavens" and was supported by columns of classical design.

The stage:

The Elizabethan stage was an adaptation of medieval conventions. For example, the Elizabethan stage platform originated in the medieval unlocalized plateau, and the facade of the Elizabethan stage had evolved from the mansions of medieval religious drama.

The Elizabethan stage also made use of trapdoors in the stage platform, and machinery in the towers, which was used to lift and move performers. Props, like beds, thrones, and altars were not used to show a scene's locale but to simply aid the action.

Acting Companies.

Two kinds of acting companies existed during the Elizabethan era. These were adult companies and boys' choirs. The latter consisted of a group of choirboys who were conducted by a choirmaster (who received all profits).

They performed in court chapels.

The other company consisted mainly of 12 to 25 adult men. No women were allowed on stage, so young boys played the female roles. Many of the main actors were shareholders in the company and received a share of the profits.

As apprentices, young boys were apprenticed from the age of 10 years to a senior actor, who would train him in performance, provide him with toom and board and receive his apprentice's wage until he came of age and became an independent actor.

To survive, acting companies had to perform often to secure a constant income. They also had to have a large repertory of plays to perform, so as to keep the limited amount of audience members coming back.

All Elizabethan acting companies had to be under patronage of various nobles, otherwise they were referred to as
"masterless men", classified as vagabonds or rogues.

Two main acting companies performed in London theatres, and these were the Lord Chamberlain's Men, and the Admiral's Men.

Shakespeare was part of the Chamberlain's Men, whose patron was the Lord Chamberlain and who were run by Richard Burbage. The actors in this company owned shares within it as well as their playhouse and its properties.

The Admiral's men, patronaged by Sir Admiral and run by Alleyn, had no shares in their company. They paid rent for the use of a theatre to Henslowe, who also paid them salaries.

**Elizabethan Audience**

The audience members came from all walks of life: men and women, infants and adults. To enter the theatre, one penny was paid and the person was entitled to stand in the yard before the stage (and was referred to as grounding). An extra penny allowed them to sit in the first floor gallery and another penny another gallery higher. It is possible the amount of audience members reached into the thousands.

As performances were often three hours long, their behavior became very rowdy. Talking during dull moments, joviality and the selling of food added up to great commotion actors had to deal with!

**Elizabethan Costume**

Elizabethan costume fundamentally consisted of Elizabethan dress. No matter the period of the play, actors always wore contemporary costume. However, according to a character's racial or national stereotype, characteristic accessories would be added to the outfit. This included a breastplate and helmet for Roman soldier, a turban for a Turk, long robes for Eastern characters, gabardines for Jews and a dress for a Moor.

Costumes accounted for a majority of companies' expenses especially their maintenance. In Elizabethan theatre, processions, battles and celebrations were the order of the day and vibrant color and pageantry was exhibited.

**Elizabethan Playwrights**

The very well known Elizabethan playwrights were Shakespeare, Marlowe and Jonson. Others, somewhat lesser dramatists included John Fletcher and John Webster. For a playwright they often needed to sell between 4 or 5 plays a year. Once a company bought a play, it was that company's property and the playwright gained no further income.

The life of a play lasted between one and two years, depending on its popularity. A company learnt a new play about every 17 days, and after a play's main performance, it was later performed after a few weeks' intervals until they were dropped from the repertory.

At one stage, during a four-week period in the autumn of 1595, 15 different plays were performed. Plays were usually performed at 2pm, as it was not too warm yet there was sufficient