

# The Renaissance Courtier

Like the ancient Greeks and Romans they admired, the Italians of the Renaissance were dedicated to living the good life on earth. They devoted themselves to the cultivation of all the qualities and talents of the individual. The ideal of the Renaissance was the well-rounded personality. Among the many books dealing with the education and training of the "universal man," the most popular was Baldassare Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier*, published in Italian in 1528. Castiglione (1478-1529) was himself a courtier and a successful diplomat. His book was translated into many languages and went through numerous editions. Castiglione's portrait of the perfect courtier and his instructions for the development of both body and mind provided a model for the training and the behavior of a gentleman for the upper classes in Europe.

I am of opinion that the principal and true profession of the Courtier ought to be that of arms; which I would have him follow actively above all else, and be known among others as bold and strong, and loyal to whomsoever he serves. And he will win a reputation for these good qualities by exercising them at all times and in all places, since one may never fail in this without severest censure. . . .

And . . . I would have him well built and shapely of limb, and would have him show strength and lightness and suppleness, and know all bodily exercises that befit a man of war: whereof I think the first should be to handle every sort of weapon well on foot and on horse, to understand the advantages of each, and especially to be familiar with those weapons that are ordinarily used among gentlemen. . . .

[The Courtier should] avoid affectation to the uttermost; . . . and, to use possibly a new word, to practice in everything a certain nonchalance that shall conceal design and show that what is done and said is done without effort and almost without thought. . . .

Source: Baldassare Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, translated by Leonard E. Opdycke, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1903, pp. 25 *passim*.

Our Courtier then will be esteemed excellent and will attain grace in everything, particularly in speaking, if he avoids affectation; into which fault many fall, and often more than others, some of us Lombards, who, if they have been a year away from home, on their return at once begin to speak Roman, sometimes Spanish or French, and God knows how. And all this comes from overzeal to appear widely informed. . . .

I think that what is chiefly important and necessary for the Courtier in order to speak and write well is knowledge. . . .

Nor would I have him speak always of grave matters, but of amusing things, of games, jests, and waggery, according to the occasion; but sensibly of everything, and with readiness and lucid fullness; and in no place let him show vanity or childish folly. . . .

I would have him more than passably accomplished in letters, at least in those studies that are called the humanities, and conversant not only with the Latin language but with the Greek, for the sake of the many different things that have been admirably written therein. Let him be well versed in the poets, and not less in the orators and historians, and also proficient in writing verse and prose, especially in this vulgar [vernacular] tongue of ours. . . .

You must know that I am not content with the Courtier unless he be also a musician and unless, besides understanding and being able to read notes, he can play upon divers instruments. For if we consider rightly, there is to be found no rest from toil or medicine for the troubled spirit more becoming and praiseworthy in time of leisure than this. . . .

I wish to discuss another matter, which I deem of great importance and therefore think our Courtier ought by no means to omit: and this is to know how to draw and to have acquaintance with the very art of painting.

And do not marvel that I desire this art, which today may seem to savor of the artisan and little to befit a gentleman; for I remember having read that the ancients, especially throughout Greece, had their boys of gentle birth study painting in school as an honorable and necessary thing. . . .

The game of tennis . . . is nearly always played in public, and is one of those sports to which a crowd lends much distinction. Therefore I would have our Courtier practice this, and all the others except the handling of arms, as something that is not his profession, and let him