Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1986 Volume III: Topics in Western Civilization: Ideals of Community and the Development ofUrban Life, 1250-1700

Feasts, Fairs and Festivals: Mirrors of Renaissance Society

Curriculum Unit 86.03.06
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During the final month of the school year, my students are well ahead of me: in their minds, they are already out of school and into the playground of summer. The last month of school is the most challenging for me. Just when my reserves on energy are nearly depleted, my students' energies and attentions are fully charged—but not for school. Their bermuda shorts, colorful T's and sunglasses remind all, constantly, that vacation time is only days away.

This unit is designed to meet both of our needs: on my part, to make the last month a meaningful learning time, on their part, to help my students understand why summer is so important and why they feel the way they do. We will use a study of Renaissance holidays and culture to explore some of the feelings they are experiencing as they get ready for the summer vacation: to examine the meaning and importance of holidays and to trace the common denominator of why there are holidays both past and present. This fascinating subject matter will wind up my ninth grade course in world civilization. A study of festivals thus will be informative on several levels. Why do people celebrate? Why are the feelings of anticipation as important as the celebration? Such questions as these will help students understand why summer is important to them both individually and culturally.

As part of the new humanitiesarts curriculum being developed at the Cooperative High School, this unit for ninth graders of all levels will draw on three main disciplines: social studies, English and the arts, both visual and performing. While its focus will be rooted in the rituals and festivals of the Renaissance, the unit will explore themes relating both to developments made in the Renaissance and to the personal growth of my students. As such, it is a unit about connections. Not only will the study of festivals allow students to see the connection between the past and the present and relatedness of their English, social studies and art classes, it will help them understand some of the changes and developments they themselves are going through.

Studying these festivals has something to do with the experience of the student. Rebirth and discovery are two of the most important themes of the festival, both in ancient times and even in our own times. Students often experience feelings of both during holidays, for holidays can be times of growth, even though the students may not know it. The festival was a time of "renewal" of self and society, a reminder of the natural year, and a symbol of spiritual resurrection. It was a time for an individual to discover or affirm how he fit into the community structure, through common, ritualized experience.

Studying Renaissance festivals can help students see themselves and their own development. Through study and discussion, I hope they will begin to identify those periods and activities in their own lives which are a reflection of the values and ideals of the larger community. At this point, they see holidays (our word for festivals and rituals) only in terms of what a holidy does for them as individuals—fun, time off and relaxation. For example, summer for them is a time to stay up late, sleep more, pursue hobbies and participate in activities of their choice.

Our culture puts much emphasis on individual growth. Because summer provides freedom from a structured learning environment, the individual is able to explore his own interests freely. Students may recognize the personal value of summer but not the cultural value. When I meet my students in the summer, they seem more relaxed; they are in control of their lives doing things they want and they seem secure, almost more mature. They are not playing the role of student in a hierarchical setting; rather, they seem happier to see me, I think, because they are meeting me as individuals.

This unit is designed to help them see why summer, in particular, is meaningful for them by examining the kinds of festivals Rennaisance people enjoyed and discussing the meaning of those festivals. It's easier for them to find meaning in other festivals that they do not take part in and then to connect the meaning to their own experience of holiday anticipation and participation.

Through the school system, our culture ritualizes the transition between the formal structured learning environment and the free time of summer. Awards assemblies, Field Day, book collections, banquets, the Prom and room cleaning are all activities which tell students that the time for learning is over and the fun and free time of summer are beginning. These activities are significant symbols: part of student behavior is anticipatory and the other part is reactionary. We, as a society, give them permission to act and feel the way they do in the last month precisely because of the rituals of this time.

A look at Renaissance rituals will introduce them to the idea that rituals and holidays have both personal and cultural meaning. A study of festivals will help them understand how they have both personal experiences that are their own and group experiences that reaffirm the values of their culture. Students will be encouraged to consider the meaning of and the reasons for this duality, their identity as an individual and as a community member. After looking at Renaissance festivals, students will be challenged to identify some of the rituals in high school and in the culture at large that have allowed them to discover and grow.

Renaissance Developments

The term "Renaissance" generally refers to the period of time from about 1350 to about 1600 when exciting developments in thought, literature and art transpired. Although the word literally means rebirth, Renaissance has come to mean more than a revival of interest in the classical learning of Greece and Rome. The Renaissance, in general, has come to mean a flowering of man's ability to think, explore, learn, and educate.

The steady growth of an urban society—particularly in the Italian citystates—led to a different society which experimented with new ideas and developed sophisticated expressions of thought and art. Although the Church retained its power and influence and adjusted to the spread of urbanity by becoming more urbane itself, the new culture was becoming increasingly nonecclesiastical. The universities, which had once been dominated by the Church, were giving way to secular centers of learning in academies and courts. An equally

important development was the spread of work in the vernacular as opposed to Latin, the language of the Church.

Of all the developments made in the Renaissance, humanism embodied the most common and basic intellectual ideals of this period. This elitist program replaced medieval scholastic emphasis on logic and metaphysics with the study of language, literature, history, and ethics. In a broader sense, humanism stressed the "dignity of man," especially man's ability to master his fate, serve family, society, and the state. Although the principal Renaissance humanists were Italian, their influence inspired new thinking and art in the north.

The Discovery of "The Folk"

The impact of humanism was greatest among Europe's educated elite. It was not until the 18th and 19th centuries that the idea of "folk" or common people began to interest European and particularly German intellectuals. The "discovery" of the peasant who accounted for roughly 80% of the population in the Middle Ages, and whose culture and education were completely oral, led to a whole movement of research and writing about the "folk" of the earlier periods. Scholars who specialized in Renaissance folk culture found great variety in both form and function of peasant culture.

The traditions of these nonelite members of Renaissance societies took many forms. Some scholars actually invaded peasant homes to literally catch the folktales and folksongs before they died out. Some researchers studied decorated marriage chests or devotional images for insight into folk customs. Others analyzed plays, broadsides and chapbooks copied down from spoken language of the various groups of common people. Of all the popular traditions scrutinized, none was more revealing or important than the festivals, for they provided an opportunity to observe. What people did in a festival, how they acted and what the parts of the festival were, all gave clues to how and what people thought.

Although not every group in the Renaissance society necessarily interrelated in these community celebrations, all groups participated in some sort of celebration throughout the year. Each experience presented the society with an opportunity from which people could draw an identity and a sense of community. The Church, the guilds, the commoner and royalty all found rituals and symbols to express their place and purpose in society. A mirror of society, Renaissance festivals presented not so much a sample as an anatomy of society, a way to examine the qualities of the society, its essence. Peter Burke defines and describes this popular culture and reveals the underlying attitudes and values shaping early European society in his book *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* . Much of the information in the next several sections is based on his study.

The Big Tradition vs. The Little Tradition

According to social anthropologist Robert Redfield, who wrote in the 1930's, there were two cultural traditions in Renaissance Europe. Although they did not correspond exactly to the two main social groups of elite and common people, they represent the two major different cultural experiences.

The elite participated in a phenomenon he labeled "Great Tradition" while the common people participated in the "Little Tradition." The Great Tradition was learning that was transmitted formally in the grammar schools

and universities and was not open to all. Latin was its language. On the other hand, the “Little Tradition” of oral cultural and ritual behavior was transmitted informally in the taverns, marketplace and church and was open to all.

For the elite, the two traditions had different functions. The “Great” was serious, the “Little” was play. While this definition of popular culture is an easyto-grasp model, it is limited in that it does not account for the great varieties in popular culture both in the countryside and in the Renaissance cities. Not only were there regional variations in folk festivals, but each organization or guild had its own hierarchy with particular rituals associated with each step or level within its structure. In addition, the townspeople were literate and shared their customs and traditions through the written word. This was in contrast to the experience of the illiterate peasants, separated not only geographically, but also intellectually from the experience of reading and writing about themselves.

The great interaction between the two traditions was formalized by an intermediary group of semiliterates who belonged to what is sometimes called the “chapbook culture.” The members of this culture had gone to school but not for long. They knew enough about both traditions to mediate between them. This connection was significant because it was through these semiliterates that the themes and meanings of rituals and festivals were put into writing.

Mediators of Popular Culture

Part of the difficulty in studying Renaissance fesitvals is that the participants did not usually document their own activities. Rather, they were participants, acting out in these celebrations without necessarily cultivating a consciousness or awareness of their meaning. The oral traditions and actions of these peasant craftsmen, herdsmen, sailors, servants, beggars and thieves are described by people outside of the common culture, people who were both literate and aware of what they were doing.

Historians have relied on six kinds of mediators to help them interpret attitudes and values expressed in folk activities and performances. Great writers of the period, such as Villon and Rabelais, had connections with both traditions and therefore provided some information. Friars, particularly Franciscans, were often sons of common people and were bi-cultural; that is, they were both university-educated and marketplaceoriented. Their records, letters, and sermons serve as valuable sources. Broadsides and chapbooks reproduced the peasant speech and stories and so provide insight into cultural attitudes and beliefs. Many stories and songs, collected individually from great numbers of craftsmen, peasants, both men and women, offer still another source of information on popular attitudes. Interesting trial records of criminals, heretics and witches reveal more. Finally, riots and rebellions represent dramatic expressions of large popular groups. All of these sources provide fragmentary evidence of activities performed in another time. Using not only a variety of these sources but also a variety of methods, historians, folklorists, sociologists and anthropologists work together to help illuminate the shadowy performances of this earlier time. To introduce students to the subject of documentation, I am planning to spend a day or two on examples of the kinds of sources mentioned here. Most literature anthologies contain selections of folktales, stories and songs for each period or culture being studied. Good sources for popular ballads are V. de Sola Pinto’s *The Common Muse* , collections by Hyder Rollins, and William Chappell’s *The Roxburghe Ballads* .

Transmission of Popular Culture

Almost every Renaissance family had some role in transmitting values to the children of the next generation in the stories they told, lessons they stressed and activities they performed. A smaller group of people were more actively involved in transmitting popular culture. Professional or popular craftsmen, travelling entertainers and people's artists comprised a small but important group of traditionbearers. A less clearly defined group were the amateurs or parttime specialists, who often had other occupations but worked for guilds, fraternities, or clubs. These storytellers, musicians, perachers, healers and artists helped popularize and spread stories of the common people. Many of these specialists performed at fairs, feasts and festivals throughout Europe.

The settings or space in which culture is transmitted also provide interesting clues as to the nature of folk culture. Because most of what was passed on to Renaissance society took place at home, much of what defined daily life or routing activity has escaped historians' investigation. Fortunately, most of the Renaissance festivals were held in public places: the church, the tavern and the marketplace or piazza, depending on location in Europe and activity involved. In spite of the great regional variations in celebrations and the individuals involved in transmitting popular culture, most forms fit into a fairly traditional framework. They form five broad categories including religious holidays (Shrove Tuesday, Easter, Christmas); Saints' Days when fairs were often held (Martinenas and St. George's); familial celebrations (birth, confirmation, death, marriage); official holidays (mayoral pageants, triumphs); and folk or seasonal festivals (Midsummer Eve).

All of these feasts have common characteristics which may parallel rites of passage. The holiday provides the opportunity to segregate the "carnivalesque" behavior that may be present because of some conflict within the society form or structure. The wild behavior or violence is actually an attempt to resolve the crisis. Only after the unusual behavior can the reconciliation occur. As in the case of a crisis, this is necesary, for it allows people to reaggregate or reintegrate into their social group.

Examples of Traditional Forms of Popular Culture

Without being able to physically transport students back in time on a Renaissance fieldtrip, one way into the culture is through analysis of artists' representations of the festivals of this period. These imaginary fieldtrips to the folk ceremonies and celebrations can be exciting experiences for even the unworldly ninth grader. What follows is a description of each of the traditional forms of popular culture with examples of famous paintings which portray the kind of activity involved. The descriptions are intended for the teachers' background and information and may be used in discussion. The core activity for this unit is a slide show to be viewed and discussed over a three to fourday period. Readings and other related activities will be described later in this unit.

Brueghel’s Peasant FFtes

The earliest and most popular forms of peasant celebrations were the feast and the dance. Whether performed for religious or secular reasons, the “kermis,” or combination fair and feast celebrating a church’s patron saint, served as a release from the daily routine. These were occasions on which to sing, dance, drink and forget about work and worries.

The art of the Low Countries during the Renaissance period found its greatest practioner in Peter Brueghel the Elder (c. 1525Ð1569). Although Brueghel was influenced by works showing biblical scenes and classical myths by Italian Renaissance painters, his work remained distinctively Flemish in both subject matter and style. Continuing the tradition of earlier Flemish artists such as the van Eycks in realistically portraying scenes, from everyday life, he was one of the earliest painters to pay attention to the life of the peasantry. In Holland, where pictures of folk celebrations flourished, it was the burgher rather than the state or church who patronized the artist. Middle class taste for familiar, realistic scenes popularized the Brueghel style, including scenes of large groups of robust and very dynamic peasants set against familiar landscapes or in common settings. Unlike the “ideal” humans painted by Italian Renaissance artists, Brueghel’s subjects are truly recognizable people, although they are somewhat generalized and anonymous. Each of his paintings is so realistic that the viewer almost feels invited to participate in the fun.

It is through the artist’s eye that students can be transported back in their imaginary fieldtrip. As students view the slides of the artist’s work, encourage them to become active participants in these public rituals. As they observe or view the spectacle, students may begin to correct themselves with the people in the celebrations. They may begin to draw parallels between Renaissance rituals and those of today. Spend as much time as possible discussing each event. Challenge students to consider not only *what* is going on in these pain,tings and prints, but *why* . In order to help students focus their attention on particular aspects of the slides, it might be useful to ask students to start by making a list of all the activities going on in a painting.

“Peasant Dance” represents a church kermis or feast. Students will easily identify the holiday activities portrayed—dancing, drinking, kissing, eating. While some peasants play bagpipes, others seem to be making clumsy movements. Seated at a table are three men representing deaf, dumb and blind. Ask students to describe the people, their clothes, or the colors of the clothes. Is there anything about them that defines these activities as special? Students may point out the use of the color red to brighten up the otherwise earthy tones in the painting. Point out the banner (in red) hanging on the inn, the fool (dressed in red) in the background, the child (in red) dancing in the foreground. Ask students to describe the setting. Why would a dance be outside in the center of the village? Why during the day? What kind of community does this represent? Use some of these same general questions in discussing the following slides with students.

“Peasant Wedding” portrays similarlooking people engaged in various activities. This time, Brueghel uses the barn as the setting. How can students tell it is harvest time? What do the green cloth and paper gown hanging behind the bride indicate? Ask students to identify the activities—people eating rice pudding, playing bagpipes, pouring wine. The use of the color red symbolizes the holiday or special event. Ask the class to try to identify people who may look alike (relatives).

“Feast of Fools” portrays one of the most spectacular festivals held in Antwerp in August of 1561. In this painting Brueghel presents his rendition of a play entitled “Sotte Bollen,” performed at the festival. The Flemish word “sottebol” denotes a ballheaded fool. All of Brueghel’s subjects are ballheaded. The Flemish association of ball-heads with foolishness is based on an old Flemish proverb, “His head turns foolish.” Ask

students to describe what is foolish in the painting. Who are the fools? What is foolish about “festival” or holiday behavior? Why do people risk being foolish at festivals? Part of this behavior reflects our need to appeal to our deepest values when we are in a state of “inbetweenness” (that is, in between the segregation of holiday behavior and the rejoining of members to their positions in the social structure.

“The Land of Cockaigne” represents a mythical land where food was already prepared, no one worked, and all was relaxation. The three main figures of the cleric, peasant and knight are all shown as equals, all fat people reclining in languid stupor after a great feast. Ask students to think about why, in reality, this may be a fool’s paradise. Ask students to imagine their own ideal holiday and compare the elements of their concepts to those pictured in Brueghel’s view.

“Wedding Dance” and the “Kermis of St. George” are two other Brueghel works which express the themes described in the previous works.

Carnival

“The Battle Between Carnival and Lent” is one of Brueghel’s best portrayals of the most pervasive contrasts of his world. This threeday festival of frantic eating, drinking and carousing that preceded the forty days of Lent was one of a number of popular celebrations coopted by the Church and made official as part of the preLenten ritual. Carnival was a time of institutionalized disorder, “the world upside down,” a reversal of roles, a game. It offered the opportunity for a rich display of man at his most outrageous extremes of behavior. The fact that the church had to allow carnival or this popular feast in order to enforce Lent was a source of tension between the Church officials and the people.

Brueghel’s painting portrays swarming activities in which beggars mix with partgoers costumed as kings and rioters dance briskly amid cripples who can barely get about on crutches and callused nubs of what used to be knees. This work captures the feeling of the precarious balance between life and death. This panoramic bird’seye view is centered on a mock battle—a traditional part of the festivities—in which the piety of Lent was comically pitted against the revelry of carnival. At the center, a brightly dressed, grossly fat man representing carnival’s excesses is mounted on a huge beer barrel, ready to joust with Lent, a skinny creature dressed in mourning and seated on an uncomfortable prayer stool. Carnival holds a cooking spit garnished with rich holiday food, while Lent weakly holds out a baker’s paddle holding two herring. Behind the Carnival to the left and down the side streets, students will identify masked partygoers eating waffles, drinking beer and dancing merrily. In front of the Inn of the Blue Boat, comedians act out a farce called “The Ugly Bride” while a couple kisses in the window.

In contrast with the brawling left side of the picture, where begging cripples are completely ignored, the right side (lighter side) is filled with activities showing piety and charity. Darkrobed worshippers walk from the church, a fishwife does a thriving trade and wealthy burghers give charity.

“Carnival in the Piazza Colonna, Rome” by Jan Miel is another painting which evokes the tension of carnival. In this painting, the statue of St. Paul atop a Greek column is surrounded by Roman nobility wearing lavish costumes and mounted on horseback. The common people are presented as the merrymakers: panhandlers, urchins and hawkers. Also pictured is the Commedia dell’Arte, a professional society which performed comedy.

In the painting, actors are masqueraded as figures from all strata of society. It is Shrove Tuesday, the last day of the carnival. Merrymaking has reached its peak as winter hangs in effity.

Meaning and Importance of Holiday

Both Brueghel's painting and that of Jan Miel provide a way into the discussion with students about the meaning and importance of holiday. To encourage students to think about the meaning of holiday before viewing these two slides, it might be helpful to ask them to either make a list of the elements of or write a brief description of the best holiday or celebration they can remember or that they might imagine. You might decide to ask students to limit their description to a traditional holiday celebration or open it up to include individual celebration. Ask them to include the special symbols of the holiday, the objects, food, dress, and behavior connected with it. Ask them to think about the setting, the activities, the people. As with people of Renaissance societies, students will have many different concepts of holiday.

After sharing and discussing the students' ideas about the meaning of holiday, ask them to identify the *elements* of carnival shown in both Brueghel's painting and Jan Miel's. There are three main categories of activities which students will easily recognize. The *procession* (or parade) was similar to those held today in terms of length, number of floats, variety of people involved and special clothes worn. A second group of activities was *competition* . Horse and foot races, jousts, football, boats battling and tugsofwar were activities designed to resolve the conflicts of everyday life. The third element of the carnival involved the *performance of a play* . In essence, the whole city in Jan Miel's painting becomes a theatre without walls. The actors were the spectators, participating in mock sieges, sermons, lawsuits, and other farces. The fat carnival clown battled the thin Lenten figure in Brueghel's carnival and the comedians acted out the "Ugly Bride."

Once students have identified the elements of carnival, ask them to think about the themes of the activities. There were *three themes* of carnival which clearly related to the life cycle. From late December or early January when the carnival began, there was great eating of of *food* . Beef and pork, pancakes and waffles were the "carne" or lifegiving food. Since carne could also be interpreted as "flesh," *sex* found some interesting symbols in carnival activities. Sausages and other phallus symbols were often paraded through the streets. Many weddings took place in this time and record numbers of births were recorded nine months later. The third theme, one connected to resolution of conflict or death, was *violence* . People were expected to verbally insult and criticize each other, the social structure, and authority. Sometimes activities led to destruction of property or loss of life, but these were extreme cases and rare. Since people were masked and in costume, in many instances these acts were anonymous. In all of these actions, there was the sense that in criticizing authority and the roles played in everyday life, people were appealing to their deepest values. If everything were perfect, then this is how it would be.

A final discussion topic related to Renaissance carnival might be on the *function of carnival* . This might be explored by a study of the comedy "The Wandering Scholar" by Hans Sachs (available in Teachers Institute Office). What were the purposes of carnival? Ask students to debate whether they think carnival's primary purpose was entertainment or expression of community structure, power, and solidarity. Did carnival encourage traditional customs and therefore represent a means of social control or were the acts of violence a form of protest against the social order? What was it about the wild celebration that allowed a sober return to the normal social structure and daily routine? One way to connect students to the idea of carnivalesque behavior is to discuss the rituals associated with Halloween. Why do people wear masks and costumes? What

kinds of costumes do they wear? How does behavior change? Why do people play pranks on others on the night before Halloween? Why the mischief? Why do people collect food? What elements, themes, and functions are similar to those in Renaissance celebrations?

May Day

Another example of a Renaissance festival emphasizing the theme of renewal was May Day. This was a celebration held to insure the success of the crops. The maypole, a symbolic object associated with this festival, was usually a tree cut down in a ceremony which took place in the nearby woods. In the village, lively and elaborate games such as skittles (lawn bowls) were played. In some areas, plays and music were performed as a group of villagers brought the flowerdecked pole in a procession into the village green. Usually, a man dressed in green, representing Robin Hood, symbolized the outlaw friend of the poor.

Many rituals and ceremonies welcomed the arrival of spring. A Queen of the May was chosen; an archery contest held; plays were performed; dancers, jugglers, hobbyhorses rocked and jesters performed. Some students may be familiar with this seasonal festival as some area elementary schools still celebrate May Day, even with a maypole and May Dance. Gertrude Hartman, in *Medieval Days and Ways* , describes the May Day activities for students (pp. 102106). In the reading, students will find many examples of rituals which symbolize an important cultural idea. Ask them to identify the elements, the themes, and functions of these symbolic activities.

Feast of Corpus Christi

One of the most important European summer festivals involved a daylong procession from a tent to the town's cathedral. Unlike the peasant dances, weddings, and small village feasts, this formal pageant incorporated as many groups in the procession as existed. Gertrude Hartman in *Medieval Days and Ways* gives an in teresting and informative description of the role of the guilds in presenting plays on portable stages (pp. 190-198). Other sources on drama in festivals are V.A. Kolve's *The Play Called Corpus Christi* and Geyenne Wickham's *Early English Stages, Vol. I* , (pp. 122 ff.). Edward Muir describes the Venetian pageant in *Civic Ritual in Renaissance Venice* . Before thousands of spectators assembled in the piazza under a huge white canopy, the ceremonies officially began when the doge (mayor) entered the square, confessed, and took his seat to watch the parade which sometimes lasted five to six hours. The groups invited to attend formed a lengthy preamble to the ducal procession itself. The composition of the procession was distinctive in two ways: every important group in Venice participated and it assured the population of official support for pilgrimages.

In addition to the human parade were many floats and demonstrations. Some of the religious objects were so heavy that four or more men had to carry them. Religious devotion was not the only characteristic of this solemn procession. Decorated clothes, silver plates, beautiful scenes on platforms, gilded and jeweled objects were not only beautiful to see; they marked a grand display of Venetian wealth and power. In particular, they signaled if not the triumph of state over church, the separation of it.

Students can look at several slides of the Corpus Christi procession. "The Procession of Corpus Christi" by

Giacomo Franco and “Procession in Piazza San Marco” by C’entile Bellini both attest to Venetian precision and social control. Students can learn more about how these processions reflect the hierarchical nature and values of Renaissance societies by reading Thomas Dekker’s description of a London triumphal processions entitled “Troia Nova Triumphans” (available in Insitute office). With such a feast as this, we begin to pass from popular to official fesitivity. All the feasts that follow are more in the realm of splendid official pageants and represent an opportunity for contrast. Ask students to discuss the main differences between “official” and “popular” celebrations. The number and varieties of people, the wealth displayed, the apparent order and control, the different symbols and symbolic objects are some of the general points they may discuss.

St. John The Baptist

Also called Midsummer Festival, this important holiday was also organized around the theme of renewal. Held on June 24th, the longest day of the year, the celebration represents a community demonstration of fraternity and solidarity in honor of St. John the Baptist, patron saint of Florence. For weeks before the actual feast, there was wild mischiefmaking, similar to the carnival. A short and very readable description of this celebration appears in *The Society of Renaissance Florence* , edited by Gene Brucker (pp. 7578). By this time, students should easily recognize the kinds of activities involved—processions, plays, competitions, and fireworks. In addition, they may be able to identify symbols of this holiday, themese related to various rituals, and the functions of this holiday. Students may also note the similarity in the setting—the church and the piazza. Finally, students should note those distinctions in the ritual which identify the celebration as peculiar to Florence (the sixteen districts, the wool weavers guild, the Baptistry of St. John, towers around the Piazza della Signoria, etc.) Bellini’s “Feast of St. John The Baptist” represents the use of public squares for drama.

St. James Feast

Held on July 25th in Florence, this civic fete supported by the Medici family was held to promote political stability, economic prosperity, and civic pride. Students can observe Jacques Callot’s “The Fan” which portrays this celebration. Students will again recognize similarity in activities involved: processions and competitions. This festival, however, takes place on the river. Ask students to consider why. What time of year is it? What river is Florence located on?

In Callot’s painting, King Dye and King Cloth (representing the two largest guilds), both in love with the exotic Queen Barulla, seek to win her favor by bringing sacrifices to Vulcan. The King’s fleets sail to Vulcan Island where priests and cyclops danced around Vulcan statues. The competing armies disembarked and battled. The victorious dyers threw their adversaries in the water, defeated the cyclops, and stole the sacrifice. Vulcan’s wrath is then symbolized in the fireworks.

Ask students to consider the function of this dramatic display of wealth and power. Suggest an extracredit, mini-research project on the Medici of Florence or their counterparts: in France, the Valois; in England, the Tudors and Stuarts; in Spain, Austria and the Netherlands the Hapsburgs. Each of these strong families influenced the kind of celebrations held in their domains in the late sixteenth century. The various pageants of all these dynasties are discussed and compared in Roy Strong, *Splendour at Court* (1973).

Triumphs of Julius Ceasar

While strong families dominated European politics and culture in the late sixteenth century, it was powerful individual kings who controlled society in the first half of the sixteenth century. Maximilian I of Germany, Louis XII of France and Henry VII of England represented the allpowerful national heroes of their dominions. “Triumph of Julius Ceasar” by Mantegna represents one version of “official” occasions for display of power, wealth, and loyalty. Albrecht Durer’s engraving of Maximilian’s triumphal car does the same thing.

Obviously, there is not only a wealth of information on Rennaissance celebrations, there are many paintings of fairs, weddings, christenings and other fesitivities. The intent of this unit has been to connect disciplines and experiences through the holidays. What follows is a list of additional activities which may be used as culminating experiences involving English, art (visual and drama) and history classes.

Suggested Additional Activities

1. Students can create a festal calendar for the Renaissance and a contemporary festal calendar. Sometimes a project like this is easier to accomplish by breaking students into groups. Use the five main categories of celebrations as divisions and then combine all of their work on one large vertical scroll which can be displayed in the room.
2. Another activity planned for this unit includes visiting local art museums to see and hear about selected works of art depicting Renaissance revelry. Students can look at paintings, engravings, tapestries, prints or objects. I suspect that after viewing and discussing works of art in class related to this unit, their experience in the museum might be quite successful.
3. Hopefully, the drama class can work on a scene from any of the readings done or rituals portrayed in paintings. See appendix to this unit in Institute office.
4. Very hopefully, this unit will conclude with a Renaissance feast, complete with food, folly, fashion and fun. Again, this will have to be coordinated with and supported by the history, English, and art departments. As with all curriculum units, the work is ongoing. It may take another nine months to plan the feast! Certainly, Madeline Pelner Cosman’s *Fabulous Feasts: Medieval Cookery and Ceremony* will be a valuable guide for planning this activity.
5. New Haven’s audiovisual department owns two video cassettes on the “Middle Ages” and the “Renaissance,” both of which may be useful for background information or flavor.
6. Use art books such as Jansen’s to show famous paintings, if slides are not available.
7. If anyone you know has been to Venice, London, Florence, or any city that has festivals, ask them to show slides to class so that students get a feeling for each place.
8. Students who have attended local Greek, Irish, Hispanic, Italian or other festivals may wish to share experiences with the class. Try to point out common elements (food, music, special clothes, dancing, competition) and those elements which make each festival unique.

Annotated Bibliography

An appendix to the unit, containing primary source readings mentioned with this unit, is available in the Teachers Institute office.

Burckhardt, Jacob. *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* . New York, 1958.

For teachers—chapter 8—good section on festivals.

Burke, Peter. *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* . New York: New York University Press, 1978.

For teachers—if you can read only one book on this topic, this is it. Comprehensive but interesting.

Brucker, Gene, ed. *The Society of Renaissance Florence: A Documentary Study* . New York: Harper and Row, 1971.

Cosman, Madeline Pelner. *Fabulous Feasts: Medieval Cookery and Ceremony* . New York: Braziller.

Wonderful for recipes and everything one needs to know to host a medieval banquet!

Foote, Timothy and Editors of TimeLife Books. *The World of Bruegel (c. 15251569.)* New York: TimeLife Books, 1968.

Hartman, Gertrude. *Medieval Days and Ways* . New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1937.

For students—wonderful descriptions, short readings, good illustrations.

MacAloon, John J. *Rites, Drama, Festival, Spectacle* . Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1984.

Muir, Edward. *Civic Ritual in Renaissance Venice* . Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1981.

For teachers—rich in detail on selected festivals in Venice.

_____, *Festivities: Ceremonies and Celebrations in Western Europe (15001790)* . Providence: Department of Art, Brown Uni versity, 1979.

For teachers and students—excellent copies of many of the famous paintings and etchings used in this unit.

Strong, Roy. *Splendour At Court* . 1973. For teachers—informative or official pageants.