



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

Feasts, Fairs and Festivals: Mirrors of Renaissance Society

Guide for 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 us all, constantly, that vacation time is only days away.

This unit is designed to meet both 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 humanities-arts 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 the 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, ritual experience.

A look at Renaissance rituals will introduce students 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.

(Recommended for World Civilization classes, grade 9 (all levels); World Literature classes, grade 9; and Art History classes, grades 9-12)

Key Words

Renaissance Art History General European

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