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Regional

Frick teaches about women in the renaissance

The Renaissance is most often viewed with awe. It was a period in which the history of the world changed thanks to the many people who worked to take Western civilization out of the Dark Ages and into modernity. Yet, when one hears about the Renaissance, all that is heard are the names of men, such as Leonardo Da Vinci and Michelangelo. Did women play any role?

"As culture became more organized and the Renaissance embraced humanist ideas, ideas of Greece and Rome became alighted to males, so the ideals of magnificence and eloquence and having wonderful rhetorical powers, strength and bravery, all became masculine ideas," said Carole Frick, professor and chair of the department of historical studies at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

Born in Racine, Wis., and raised in San Diego, Calif., Frick received two bachelor's degrees, one in fine arts and another in English literature from San Diego State University, a master's in history also from San Diego State University and a doctorate in history from the University of California at Los Angeles. It was as an undergraduate that she developed her interest in the issue of women in the Renaissance.

"When I was in college and then graduate school, there were no female artists that we knew from the Renaissance, and I always kept wondering, what were the women doing? There had to be women there," she said. "So I started reading articles and going with new practices into the historical profession. I started reading the letters, novels and material culture as artifacts of the past." To be sure, said Frick, there has been bias against the study of women among some historians. In response, she has published profusely on issues of women in the Renaissance, including the issue of liminality.

"Social liminality means that in public, women were at the borders of society," Frick said. "At home, though, it was a totally different story, but out in public they were excluded from all the institutions." The idea of women, she explained,



Photo courtesy of Stephen Fricke

Dr. Carole Frick (at the right) with a group of her students near the Coliseum in Rome, Italy.

was not romantic in nature, but rather to be used by men as property and for social advantage.

"Those who had it the roughest were little girls from poor families who were beautiful, because they could be taken advantage of," she said. "They didn't have any protection. You had three options if you were a woman in the Renaissance. You could be a wife, a prostitute or a nun."

Frick's wide array of interests and her varied educational background helps her, she said, better understand the Renaissance.

"It helps to know something about art, literature, philosophy and music, since the Renaissance was really a cultural efflorescence of that time," she said. Clothing, for example, was an important social indicator.

"Well, 40 percent of a family's wealth was

in their clothing," Frick said. "You couldn't buy a Lexus or a Rolex. There weren't many things to buy so everything was in their clothes. That was how you presented yourself to the world and clothing was severely structured. Something like 200 laws were passed in the city of Florence just trying to control what people wore, so you wouldn't mix up the classes."

One wonders how today's students react

Aldemaro Romero College Talk

when taught about this historic period. "Some people have argued the Renaissance is when modern consciousness was born because it is the first time when it was cool to be famous," Frick said. "It's the first time someone said, 'Never let them see you sweat,' 'The ends justify the means,' and 'It doesn't matter how you really are, it matters how you appear to be.' All these new ideas in the medieval period would have been considered un-Christian, unthinkable. But the Renaissance was the very first time when individualism started to liberate people from their family groups."

Frick regularly takes her students to Italy to see for themselves the remnants of this golden age of human civilization. For many of them, this is the first time that they leave the United States, fly on a plane or just see the ocean.

"They just can't stop smiling," Frick said. "Normally, students are late for class, but when we go to Italy they are always early because they can't wait to see what we are going to be doing the next day. The first day we go to Rome and we are at the Vatican and we meet Pope Benedict XVI, and then the Roman Coliseum and we stand in the patio area of Cesar Augustus' house, up in the hill and from there you can see the Hard Rock café and the American embassy, and then have a pizza, which doesn't look like the pizza in America at all. It's a cultural shock but in a really amazing way. What I find is that many of my students go back to Europe the next year because it expands their horizons."

Aldemaro Romero is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.