

The Renaissance Courtier (from The Book of the Courtier)

Baldassare Castiglione

Like the ancient Greeks and Romans, the Italians of the Renaissance were dedicated to enjoying life on earth and believed in developing those qualities that would help the individual to get the most out of life. It was also considered very important to be of good service to one's lord or master, particularly if one lived at court and served a prince. One of the most popular books on the subject was Castiglione's "The Book of the Courtier" which was published in 1528. The book was translated into many languages, went through many editions and was one source of the ideal of well-rounded "Renaissance Man."

1. What are some characteristics of the ideal Courtier and why do you think they were important for maintaining order in the Renaissance era social hierarchy?

The principal and true profession of the Courtier ought to be that of arms... to be known among others as bold and strong, and loyal to whomever he serves...

The courtier should avoid pretension, and, to use a possibly new word, to practice in everything a certain nonchalance that shall... show that what is done and said is done without effort and almost without thought...

Our Courtier will then be esteemed excellent and will attain grace in everything, particularly in speaking... I think that what is chiefly necessary for the Courtier to speak and write well is knowledge...

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

I would have him more than passably accomplished in letters, at least those which are called the humanities, and conversant not only with Latin but with 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 the historians also proficient in writing verse and prose, especially in this vernacular tongue of ours...

You must know that I am not content with the Courtier unless he is also a musician and unless, besides understanding and being able to read notes he can play upon various 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 to be of great importance that I think our Courtier must not 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 workman and little to befit the 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 almost always played in public and is one of those sports to which a crowd lends much distinction. Therefore, let our Courtier practice this, and... let him show that he does not seek or expect praise for it, nor let him seem to devote much care or time to it, although he may do it admirably...

Besides daily showing everyone that he has the worth we have already described, I would have the Courtier strive... to love and almost to adore the prince whom he serves above every other thing, and mold his wishes, habits and all his ways to his prince's liking...

Our courtier will not be a bearer of evil tidings; he will not be thoughtless in saying some things that offend instead of pleasing as he intends...

If our Courtier excels in anything besides arms, I would have him get profit and esteem from it in fine fashion; and I would have him so discreet and sensible as to be able with skill and address to attract men to see and hear wherein he thinks he excels, always appearing to do it not from ostentation but by chance and at others' request...