**The quest for Renaissance man**

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**What is the difference between being a renaissance man and a dilettante?**

AT the height of Renaissance humanism, the ideal of *Homo universalis* -- "universal man" -- inspired many men to develop their powers to the fullest. It was one of the defining visions of the Renaissance period.

This was, after all, an age of discovery in which men of learning came to believe there was nothing beyond the grasp of humanity.

Aspiring to be a universal man, committed to the pursuit of perfection across all areas of life, wasn't something for effete bookworms. Being an accomplished horseman or traveller was just as important as scholastic mastery of the arts and sciences, or playing a role in the public life of a city as a courtier.

Demonstrating proficiency in numerous fields, to be a polymath, is the most striking characteristic of the Renaissance man.

In his 16th-century handbook, The Book of the Courtier, Baldassare Castiglione wrote that the polymath must possess an attitude of sprezzatura, an effortless superiority in all they did and said.

We associate such insouciance with figures such as Leonardo da Vinci, painter, sculptor, architect, inventor, scientist, writer, or Leon Battista Alberti, architect, painter, poet, mathematician, horseman, and archer. In the post-Renaissance era, polymaths such as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Alexander von Humboldt, Benjamin Disraeli, Isaac Newton, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson and Theodore Roosevelt embodied this exalted state of being.

In today's more specialised world, where the generalist is derided as "a jack of all trades, master of none", the Renaissance man is certainly a rare beast. The type is certainly unlikely to be found among our public figures (as it may have been in previous times).

This isn't to say that there are no renaissance men left. We were reminded of this earlier this week when former leader of the Liberal Party Malcolm Turnbull, perhaps the figure most approximating the ideal in our public life, announced he would exit Australian politics.

Few would deny that Turnbull's remarkable career has displayed all the hallmarks of *Homo universalis*. A Rhodes Scholar, journalist, lawyer, merchant banker, republican campaigner, government minister and patron of the arts, Turnbull has demonstrated his proficiency in more than one domain; he even peppers his speech with allusions in Italian. Sprezzatura, indeed.

At the same time, Turnbull's various energies have been criticised for revealing a questionable restlessness. Similar criticisms are directed at Tony Abbott because of the Opposition Leader's athletic pursuits (and, some would say, at Kevin Rudd because of his writings for literary magazines).

Are our political leaders mere dilettantes rather than true renaissance men?

There is a gulf between the two in one sense. The English usage of the word dilettante stems from the Society of Dilettanti, a peculiar 18th-century London gentlemen's club dedicated to the pursuit of artistic and other delights.

Members of the group, many of whom were rakes with predilections for Venetian courtesans, would gather to exchange memories of their grand tours while consuming coffee, tea, chocolate and ice cream.

Such louche living isn't, you may say, part of the noble aim of self-realisation.

As it is used today, however, the word dilettante means something rather more limited: it connotes the idea of being a dabbler, as well as a connoisseur.

This needn't be understood pejoratively, as 19th-century historian Jacob Burckhardt highlighted: "In learning, one can attain mastery only of a limited field, namely as a specialist, and this mastery one should attain.

But if one does not wish to forfeit the ability to form a general overview, then one should be a dilettante in as many fields as possible, at any rate privately, in order to enhance one's own knowledge and enrichment of diverse historical viewpoints. Otherwise one remains an ignoramus in all that lies beyond one's speciality and, under the circumstances, on the whole, a barbarous fellow."

This sounds about right. There is something wonderfully democratic about the dilettante that makes it an ideal worth embracing as much as *Homo universalis*.

Not all of us are capable of being renaissance men but at least we can all be dilettantes.

*Readers are invited to suggest subjects for future pondering. The email address:**philosophercolumn@gmail.com*