The Art of Knowing Everything

Renaissance, meaning "rebirth," is the term commonly used to indicate the period after the Middle Ages—the late fourteenth century through the sixteenth century; as an embodiment of the rebirth of the classical past, it now serves as a precursor of our present "modern" century (Abrams 264). During the Renaissance, Baldassare Castiglione (1478 – 1529) produced "The Courtier," published 1528, which described the ideal aristocratic man: a "universal" man, who was developed in all skills, and who carried out every action with the grace of sprezzatura, the ability to perform something without obvious effort (265). It has become more apparent to me, as I make my way through five years of undergraduate education, that I aspire to being a Renaissance person, an individual who excels in, or is knowledgeable about several different subjects. Over the years, my interests have become broader, and I have become more knowledgeable and comfortable in a wide variety of areas where I would not have previously thought probable. These areas are not limited to academics, but include social skills as well.

The drawback, some believe, to being a Renaissance person is that—given the complexity of knowledge in the 21st century—he or she will never truly be an expert at any subject. Through my artifacts and essay, I would like to explore the following questions. Since I identify as a Renaissance person, what does that mean for me in this particular era? Do I have too many areas of study? Can I live up to the
ideal of performing every action with sprezzatura? Am I experiencing any sort of "rebirth"? How do I balance my interests and my responsibilities? As a Renaissance person or student, there are so many experiences and subjects to choose from, so many avenues for my time and energy. What do my artifacts say about the choices I have made without actually being aware of them? How much agency do I have in choosing? Once I make a choice, how will that choice affect my agency in choosing other experiences? How do my artifacts reflect changes in agency based on my choices? How have my areas of study evolved? Where is my trajectory taking me?

I will use nine artifacts from my undergraduate years to write a reflective essay which will explore the questions and ideas about being a Renaissance Person that I have outlined above, as well as address new questions and ideas that arise from exploring the artifacts. Together, the artifacts and reflective essay will comprise my portfolio, which will be created on the online platform Wix. My thesis advisor will be Dr. Alan Rauch, and my thesis reader will be Dr. Malin Pereira.

The first two artifacts are the core of my portfolio. They represent the most significant, life-changing discoveries and decisions during my college. My digital story, "True Love", and my Augusta Sophia project drastically changed the course of my undergraduate career and potentially the rest of my life.

A digital story is a personal narration told in a movie format using digital content, including images, audio, and video. "True Love" is the first digital story I created in a Digital Literacies class. It describes the transition from Physics major to English major, the biggest and most important decision I have had to make so far.
This choice between two separate areas of study has changed the course of my life. As a Renaissance person, this is the most prominent choice I have made in terms of choosing areas of study, and potentially, my entire future. How and why did I make that choice? How has it affected me to this day, and how will it affect me in the future?

My Augusta Sophia Project Poster is the artifact that is standing in for the whole project and experience working with the Augusta Sophia collection located in special collections in the Atkins Library. This project not only raised my research skills to the next level, but also nudged me in the direction of earning a degree in library science. This is a new area of study for me as a Renaissance person, and it suggests that throughout my life, I will find unanticipated yet fascinating avenues of exploration. It is a unique artifact as well because it represents an area in which I would, without question, be considered an expert. No one knows more about the Augusta Sophia Collection in the Atkins Library than I do because no one has invested as much time as I have to study the collection.

The next three artifacts, a pair of chopsticks, my violin artifact, and a horseshoe, represent conflicts and difficulties I have experienced as a Renaissance person.

I have a set of chopsticks from the Iron Chef competition during the first UHP Black Mountain Retreat in 2013. We watched a video clip from a documentary, *Jiro Dreams of Sushi*, and the idea was for us to take a leaf out of Jiro's book. Jiro's restaurant books months, even years in advance, and his dishes are priced at hundreds of dollars. What's more, he has been making the same sushi all his life, and
rather than constantly trying new recipes, he improved because he perfected the old. To me, the chopsticks help me keep this paradigm in mind, although it is not a model to which I aspire. As a Renaissance person, I am the opposite of Jiro. I do not desire to perfect a single, or even several trades. But if I do pursue more than one life goal, how do I come close to perfecting my expertise in those fields? How do I choose which one(s) to take to perfection? And is “perfection” so elusive an ideal, that I should settle for something less?

Playing my violin is another choice I had to make, and I have a photo to represent this artifact. It is another area of study that I gave up, even though it gave me great joy. Although I never considered myself an expert musician, I have always wanted to progress as a violinist. Yet, it is something I have given up for the time being, and I almost regret that decision; I miss playing with an orchestra, creating music with a group. What motivated to make that far-reaching choice? How will my decision play out in my future? Will I be able to go back to playing?

A horseshoe will be an artifact representing my love for animals and the outdoors. I have always loved animals, but it wasn't until my sophomore year that I started taking Western horseback riding lessons. It has been three years since then, and working with horses is something I want to continue learning until I am comfortable owning and working with my own horse, something I am not yet knowledgeable enough to do on my own. The reality is that some skills, some crafts, require real expertise, and this is one of them. Without knowing what I am doing, I could potentially endanger myself, my horse, and other people and animals around me. I also wonder, quite frequently, if I would be happier in a profession working
with horses or other animals, where I would be outside more often than in a classroom/library/office. The idea of balancing my interest in scholarly inquiry, with my love of the natural world looms over me, but if I am to embrace the Renaissance spirit, I must avoid strict binaries.

The last four artifacts are ideas, concepts, and skills that I, as a Renaissance person have found significant. The "Magical Realist Fiction" anthology, meditation, my website, and the blog post are in this category.

The anthology, Magical Realist Fiction represents the realization that I do have a favorite type of work: magical realism, science fiction/fantasy, and fairy tales. As a Renaissance person, I never identified with a specific type of literature; when asked what I liked to read, I would tell one that I read anything and everything. Now however, I have come to the realization that I do have a preference in reading material, I can focus my studies in this area. What does it mean for me, as a Renaissance person, that I have found a possible niche? Could I become an expert in this type of literature? And if I did, would a “narrow” area of scholarly inquiry, preclude my being considered a Renaissance person in terms of literature?

Meditation would fit this theme/question because I am learning to master my stress levels, and this is important for maintaining a level of sprezzatura. It is so easy for me, even now, to get worked up and worried about the amount of work I need to complete. It adds to my stress that I like for my work to be quality, and as I am my biggest critic, I worry that it is not up to mark. For this artifact, I will use a quote, the centering thought from one of the meditations in my favorite series of
meditations: "Today, I embrace my potential to be, do and have whatever I can dream."

I am currently taking a Web Application Development course, and have to design a website; the website would be my artifact. This is way outside of my comfort zone, but as a Renaissance person, it is another area that will allow me to extend my knowledge base. This may be stretching myself too thin, but then again, if I pursue library science, these skills are important and useful to acquire. Because I had virtually no agency in choosing this class, I will use this as one of the main artifacts in exploring agency.

The last artifact that I will include is the ninth blog post I wrote for the honors class “Reading in Slow Motion.” Every week, we read about 30 pages from a book, *The Elegance of the Hedgehog*, by Muriel Barbery, and then wrote a blog post based on researching any topic covered in the book. The ninth post I wrote is about lawns, something I would never have thought to research outside of the class. The way the class was conducted is analogous to the way a Renaissance person operates, because the process involves researching something different each week. We were also discussed everyone’s topic in the class, so I learned about many different ideas and approaches.

A tentative schedule for Spring 2015 is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Task</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jan 20</td>
<td>Web Design Due</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feb 3</td>
<td>Upload Artifacts</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feb 17</td>
<td>First Draft Due</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feb 24</td>
<td>Second Draft Due</td>
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March 17    Third Draft Due
March 31    Final Draft Due, upload to web/portfolio
April 7     Portfolio Defense

During the weeks between these due dates, I will meet with my advisor and reader to discuss any changes and revisions that need to be made.
Works Cited


