

To what Extent did the System of Patronage Effect Works of Art?

By Charlie Howarth

During the Renaissance, the system of patronage came into being, mainly as a reflection of the increasing capitalist emphasis being placed on life in Renaissance Italy, most notably in Florence. In its very nature as a commercial, capitalist place, Renaissance Italy was a hugely competitive place. It was therefore not surprising that works of art were very often commissioned for competitive reasons. During the Renaissance, art was not just as we think of it today, as an expressive, interesting creation. Art was a focal point of society, and a very powerful tool that powerful people used to gain an advantage. Discarding the effects it had on society for a moment, it was the key feature of the Renaissance.

In earlier times, art had less status. However, mirroring the economic development of the time, art became the thing to spend money on, for various reasons. Money lay at the centre of art, and that is why patronage is so important.

The system of patronage is a wide term and therefore there are a number of influences to consider when answering this question. Among them are the glory of the family; the honour of the city; the increasing economic power of individuals and groups; and the classical legacy that influenced art so much.

Although in the later Renaissance time, Rome became increasingly involved (with the Pope's influence), Florence and Venice were the two leading protagonists as centres of culture in the earlier years. Not surprisingly, they were also the two leading cities economically. The two cities heavily competed with the other; honour was of primal importance. As merchants and artists were encouraged to travel as much as possible, innovative ideas in pieces from other cities quickly became incorporated into artists' own city. For example, after the death of Savonarola, Florence sought to make her constitution much more similar to Venice's. As a reflection of this, a large room in the palace of the *signoria* was designed to act and look like Venetian Hall of the Great Council and two huge frescoes were commissioned, one by Leonardo, the other by Michelangelo.

By commissioning their own great works of art, smaller states could quickly achieve prominence and be "put on the map". Padua and Mantua were two lesser states at the beginning of the Renaissance, but at the end of it they were relatively important. These two examples became centres of humanist learning, as well as being locations for Donatello's equestrian statue and Pisanello's jousting scenes.

In Mantua, the second Marquis, Lodovico Gonzaga, commissioned Alberti to paint the magnificent *Triumph of Caesar* paintings. When they were finished, Lodovico's grandson told the artist that it gave the family glory "in having them in the house". This example shows the classical influence over the content of paintings. Asking for a series of paintings with Caesar in them gave Lodovico great honour. Many ambassadors flocked to see the paintings, and this seriously improved Mantua's status. So city honour was extremely important too. Lorenzo 'de Medici also said how much he admired them, increasing his association with classical times. With such important figures as Lorenzo promoting classical times, it is easy to see why so many works contained classical content.

Venice, which has already been mentioned as an important city, had very little past and only came to be powerful due to its geographic location, favourable for trade. In establishing itself as a major cultural centre, it placed emphasis on paintings which contained ancient figures who could be generic (although all Renaissance cities did to a large extent, Venice did this almost exclusively). For example, Pope Alexander III featured in a prestigious work by Gentile da Fabriano and Pisanello.

Rome, the centre of Catholicism, was an important city prior to the Renaissance. However, when the Renaissance came about, Florence and Venice quickly outshone it and the city was in decline. This was fairly drastic to the papacy, who needed to secure the long-term importance of the Catholic Church. Statues and paintings were important in churches due to their story-telling ability and also due to their function as devotional aids. During the High Renaissance, many works were commissioned by the papacy for the Vatican to help improve Rome's, and the Church's, status.

The Sistine Chapel (1480s) was perhaps the most important achievement for the Church in the late sixteenth century. It was made beautiful by a collaboration of a number of the best artists of the time. Of course, the outline of all the works within were dictated by the Church. Later on, Michelangelo painted the *Last Judgement* (1536-41) [Source A]. This is an extremely impressive work, and it could only be so through a

certain amount of leniency from the Pope towards the artist. The painting was so innovative because, up to then, depictions of the Last Judgement had been arranged in an orderly fashion, in successive tiers, starting with the figure of Christ. Michelangelo, however, envisages it as a single explosion, and the painting is very energetic. It must be said that it appears to be much more a work of Michelangelo, rather than Michelangelo just being the Church's paintbrush. Despite the fact that many non-artists were experts on art, it very much gives the impression as being the creation of a great artist. Therefore, particularly for the top artists, this shows that the system of patronage dictating works of art was not necessary exclusive.



Source A: *The Last Judgement*

Also in Rome, Raphael produced between 1509 and 1514 three famous paintings: *The School of Athens*, *The Disputation* and *Mount Parnassus*. These integrated classical arts and philosophy with Christian theology, again showing the way that classical times could influence the beliefs of the day, and how the importance of this was such that the Church did not mind pagan symbols “contaminating” their paintings.

Patronage of the city was from a number of sources. In Florence, the guilds were a heavy contributor. The guilds were, in a sense, the symbol of the city. They had a lot of power and government came from them. Therefore, it was their responsibility to make their city look impressive. Because of this, work commissioned by guilds was designed to look as impressive as possible. For example, the cloth guild took responsibility for the striking Baptistery of Florence Cathedral and in 1401 they launched a competition for someone to produce a huge pair of bronze doors. Not to be outdone, in 1418 the wool guild who looked after the Cathedral itself, announced a competition for the design of a cupola. So in the competitive world of Renaissance Italy, the various guilds competed with each other. Also, each guild was responsible for placing a statue in one of the tabernacles of the Orsanmichele. Famous artists would be commissioned to make these, and the statue would usually have some symbolism relating the guild it represented.

Family and personal patronage were very important. With a single person commissioning a painting, it was often the case that this person would heavily dictate the content. Often, the painting in question would be for a specific purpose. For instance, a lot of people (Cosimo was one of them), wanted to earn the right to get to Heaven. According to the Church, the person's chances would be improved by commissioning a religious painting. A merchant, Giovanni Rucellai explained this: “I have spent a lot of money on my house and on the church of Saint Maria Novella. All of these things give me the greatest pleasure, because they serve the honour of God, as well as the city, and they make sure I am remembered”. In the case of the religious painting, the

person would often specify the religious figures that he wanted to be in it, and often where they should be placed.

As already mentioned, money was at the centre of the art. How much, and how a patron paid the artist often determined the output. The contracts between the two would often specify a price and delivery date. Of course, if the painting was going to be too big or take too much time, the artist would have to produce a less impressive work. The more boorish patrons like the Duke of Ferrara paid the artist by the square foot, and so perhaps the work of the artist was of less good quality. More understanding patrons like Cosimo paid the artist for his time and materials, ensuring that the best quality could be delivered. The fact that most artists employed an assistant to paint the less important parts perhaps, in some cases, changed the output.

The materials a painter used were also of importance. The Virgin Mary would be painted in lapis lazuli as it was the most expensive type available. However, as the Renaissance progressed, the materials an artist used became less important as the skill of the artist became more important. The artists could be conscripted to certain colours if other colours weren't in the patron's price range.

As touched on, there were different kinds of patrons. It was in the artist's interests to have a good one. Fortunately for Donatello (the leading sculptor of his time), Cosimo was a good one. Thanks to Cosimo, Donatello always lived in comfort. More importantly, Cosimo understood what it was like to be an artist. He therefore did not put many pressures on Donatello and his work. This attitude is arguably a major reason why Donatello produced such beautiful work.

Further evidence of the success of "just leaving the artist to get on with it" can be found in the case of the painter Andrea Mantegna (1431-1506) who worked for the Gonzaga family in Mantua. The third Marquis of Mantua, Frederico Gonzaga, was an understanding patron. He said that one should take what one could get from "recognized masters". However, this leniency was earned: the *Triumph of Caesar* had been a great success. This clearly added to Frederico's prestige as a recently-ennobled *condottiere*-ruler and discerning patron.

It was a common practise for individual patrons or families to appear in the paintings that they commissioned. Often, if it was a religious painting, the patrons might appear at the sides or bottom of the painting. If it was a crowd scene, the patrons might appear in the crowd. For example, in Botticelli's *Adoration of the Magi* (1475) [Source B], members of the Medici family (who commissioned it) appear. "Man was the measure of all things", particularly Renaissance man, and so it was only fitting that he should appear in the paintings.



Source B: *Adoration of the Magi* (1475)

Families also competed with architecture. As various families tussled for control of the cities, most notably between the Medici and various other families like the Albizzis in Florence, producing a beautiful building could easily impress other people enough so as to give one family the upper hand. The sacristy of San Lorenzo was largely built by the Medici. A rival family, the Pazzi, followed by building their own chapel in the Franciscan church of Sante Croce.

In a world where art was centre, artists were sometimes used as instruments of cultural diplomacy. For example, Filippo Lippi was sent by Giovanni 'de Medici to Alfonso of Naples in 1457, in order to bolster the two states' alliance. This is worthy of mention only because in this case the artist would often be given orders by the home state to carry out work on one particular piece of the other state. Therefore, the content would be often be dictated quite a lot.

As has been established, Renaissance Italy was a cultural place, optimistic place, where man was thought to be of central importance. Because of this, people were inclined to look at the past, to the time when man had also been great. Humanism – an appreciation of the classics – became very popular. Many paintings by such people as Boticelli had a classical theme, often taking the form of Greek or Roman mythology. Perhaps this was due to the fact that painting classical themes allowed for a great deal of abstractness at a time when painters wanted to express their ideas, but whatever the reason paintings of a classical theme became very popular.

In this time, many important figures wanted to be associated with ancient, important figures. For example, Giovanni 'de Medici's study had twelve marble heads, encouraging the self-image of a Roman (a figure of importance and prestige).

Some artists devoted most of their life's work to create classical art because this was what many patrons wanted. An example would be Leon Battista Alberti. For Sigismondo Malatesta of Rimini, he audaciously copied the city's Roman triumphal arch in redoing the church of San Francesco as the Tempio Malatestiana. For the Gonzaga of Mantua (someone who already had the *Triumph of Caesar*, so he wanted to associate himself with Roman times), he redesigned the magnificent Sant'Andrea, with its lofty round arches and a ceiling *a cassettoni* on the Roman model. In Rome, the Papacy wanted to re-establish itself after a long absence from Rome with a programme of cultural renewal. Nicholas V instituted a library and translations of rediscovered Greek writings for scholars, and Alberti was employed to embellish the city with majestic buildings.

As has been seen, works of art were heavily affected by patronage. However, it would not be fair to say exclusively. Many of the great artists like Leonardo Da Vinci worked almost free of the system of patronage. Of course, no artist could ever completely disregard the system as it was their only source of income. Donatello is an example of someone who refused to have his work dictated by the system. Of course, he had security in his bills being paid by Cosimo. He could afford, therefore, to show his discontent at the system when he threw a bronze head that was commissioned off a building because a price for the work could not be agreed. His bronze statue of David was controversial because of the obvious homosexual delight the artist took in it, showing that he was willing to go against the established principles, and not be too influenced by patronage. The statue takes inspiration from examples from the times of Ancient Greece, showing how respect for the classics was translated into the modern Renaissance.

As artists became better respected, the system of patronage affected work less. As a patron, it was often honour enough for someone like Michelangelo to produce something, rather than the need to justify the work by dictating the content. Other influences were more important. For Boticelli, Neoplatonism was a great influence, and he explored these ideas symbolically in a series of paintings he produced in the 1470s and 1480s. For Raphael, it was his peers who were his greatest influence. His style changed dramatically depending on where he was. He was open to other ideas rather than just his own. So certainly in the later years of the Renaissance artists were much more open to other influences and less on patronage.

The example of Michelangelo is one which shows, unfortunately, how patronage could have very negative effects. He was happiest sculpting. However, he was also a reluctant painter due to some insistent and powerful popes that would not take no for an answer.

Some artists were, to an extent, in favour of the system of patronage. As has been already established, the people of the Renaissance were very competitive. Patronage was a very competitive system, and it often brought great honour to artists, particularly when they were forced to compete for commissions. Lorenzo Ghiberti described the achievement of winning the competition for designing a scene for some doors for the temple of St. John the Baptist: "To me was conceded the palm of victory by all the experts and by all my fellow competitors. Universally, they conceded to me the glory, without exception".

It could be argued that this was the greatest period in the history of art because of the healthy economic situation of Renaissance Italy. The rich did not save their money. Art was the thing to spend disposable income on. It was a way of showing wealth and gaining prestige and influence. Without patronage and consumer demand, being an artist could not have been a profession. In the Renaissance, wealth was power. And wealth was shown through owning works of art.

So, as has been seen, the system of patronage was extremely important in Renaissance Italy. It brought with it mixed blessings for artists. On the one hand, it gave them the income to support themselves and continue to produce works. On the other hand, though, it could be very constrictive on what the artist could produce, and could even sometimes decide the quality of a work. But ultimately it can be said that the art patronage allowed the Renaissance to be remembered as a golden age in history and a way of distinguishing the period from the Middle Ages. Patronage did effect works of art, but there is little evidence supporting a theory that it stopped the art of the time being as beautiful and expressive as it could have been.