

## Behind the Masterpiece: The Cultural Alliance of Patron and Artist in the Italian Renaissance

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A working relationship between patron and artist was essential to the creation of well-known masterpieces produced during the Renaissance. The relationship between the two roles is difficult to decipher, but renowned art historian Michael Baxandall discusses the ideas Dutch humanist Rudolph Agricola brought about, where he cautions modern viewers to use their “period eye” when exploring the patron-artist relationship. He warns to not solely attribute the genius of the masterpiece to the artist who rendered it, but to look deeper.<sup>1</sup> Commissioning the creative talents of artists to bring a vision to life was one of the keys to Renaissance era art. For patrons, the motivating factor was entirely self-serving, albeit an overall act of generosity. Oppositely, artists took full advantage of the sponsorship, and the resulting liaisons transformed the art into a memorial of the Italian Renaissance. The results of this period are timeless works of art that could not have come into existence without devout collaboration between the initial vision of patron and the completed product brought to life by the sponsored artist.

Although reciprocal relationships between patron and artist had existed, they flourished throughout the three centuries known as the Renaissance. The time where a universal shift in art, politics, economics, and science emerged and blossomed into a great societal change that spread across the European continent. The revival mirrored the classical Greeks and the Roman Empire, where architecture, painting, and sculpture thrived. This rebirth was evident across the continent, though most notably in Italy, where it encompassed all five dominant city-states.<sup>2</sup> Florence, in particular, was renowned for its beautiful architecture. It was a place where the arts enjoyed immense public support from its wealthy citizens. The city held tremendous influence during the Renaissance and featured a prosperous hub of global trade that enticed a well-educated diverse population of merchants and philosophers.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Baxandall, “Rudolph Agricola on Patrons Efficient and Patrons Final: A Renaissance Discrimination,” *The Burlington Magazine* 124, no. 952 (1982): 424–25.

<sup>2</sup> Florence, Milan, Naples, The Papal States, and Venice.

At the time, artistic patronage was not seen as frivolous, but instead was used to further the political, economic, and social agenda of the patrons. By funding the genius, the patron became a key contributor to developing the legacy of both Italy and its most famous and recognizable works of art. Both known and unknown artists experienced newfound interest in their talents and had become highly sought after by well-paying leading patrons. The patrons' names are not well known today, but their contribution to the creation of Renaissance masterpieces is just as valuable as the art itself.

There were many different types of patrons of the arts during the Italian Renaissance. Among the most prevalent were Popes and the Catholic church, the ruling class of families, the government, and the powerful guilds. The goal on the patron's end was to ensure their own legacy, further their social status, and ultimately uphold their prestige. The artist became the vehicle to promote the patron's ambitions or to maintain their power. There was much competition generated amongst the many patrons to have the best and they were willing to go to great lengths to achieve that objective. There were two systems of patronage; one involved taking the artist into the household and supporting them, where the other paid them for a single piece whether it be long or short term. Patrons maintained full control over the creative process and defined exactly how the finished product should look. The finished art most often reflected the political, economic, and social times in which they were created. Renaissance society placed emphasis on the importance for appreciation of the finer things in life: music, art, sculpture, and literature. Certain groups attained the ability to serve as influencers and benefactors to society by supporting the artist who would create the most recognizable images in the art world. Today, the art is solely attributed to the artist who produces the work, however, during the Renaissance, it was the patrons that ultimately was credited for the creativity. Without the prominent patrons giving these works fame, securing quality materials, and ensuring the longevity through upkeep, these masterpieces could have been lost in antiquity or could have simply not been created at all.

## **Church**

The earliest patrons to commission artists were the Pope and the Catholic Church, who were seeking to adorn church buildings. Pope Sixtus IV used his power to elect six family members as Cardinals, including his nephew Giuliano, when he entered the papacy in 1471. After Sixtus IV was ordained, he set out to renovate the Great Chapel that lies inside the Apostolic Palace, his official residence in the Vatican City. The restoration began between 1473 when Sixtus IV, known for his piety, commissioned Raphael Sanzio to weave several large tapestries depicting the doctrine of the Catholic Church to hang in the chapel. He would secure and hire a team of preeminent Renaissance painters to complete his vision of devotion.<sup>3</sup> Together the artists would create the frescos titled “Life of Moses” and “Life of Christ” on the chapel walls. He also hired fresco artist Piero Matteo d’ Amelia, to paint the ceiling of the chapel. After Pope Sixtus IV died in 1484, his nephew Giuliano became ordained as Pope Julius II. He not only continued to bestow prominence onto his predecessor and uncle but also to his family, the della Rovere.

As Pope, Julius II hired Michelangelo Buonarroti to initiate a new creation onto the ceiling for the renamed Sistine Chapel. It would take Michelangelo four years to complete it for which he was paid 3000 ducats, gold, for his efforts. Revered by Catholics, the chapel is the holy conclave in the Vatican observed for the determination of the next Pope. The chapel was completed in 1481 and is still a marvel for visitors to the Vatican City. Pope Julius II went on to even greater projects during his reign when he commissioned Milan architect, Donato Bramante, to redesign St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome:

The planning of the Basilica started when Pope Julius II commissioned a competition to design the grandest building in Christendom. The winner was Donato Bramante, and the foundation stone was laid in 1506. A series of deaths and personnel changes led to the change of architects from Bramante to Raphael to eventually Michelangelo in 1547.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Sandro Botticelli, Pietro Perugino, Domenico Ghirlandaio and Cosimo Rosselli

<sup>4</sup> “The History of St. Peter's Basilica - All You Need To Know.” Accessed April 18, 2022.  
<https://www.st-peters-basilica-tickets.com/st-peters-basilica-history/>

The altar at St. Peter's Basilica is the burial place of Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, who was martyred by the Catholic Church. The edifice rebuilt by Pope Julius II was on the existing site of a previous memorial built over the necropolis of Saint Peter. Julius II, an avid collector and connoisseur of art and architecture, had conceptualized the design of the structure even before he hired anyone to build it and already had determined the cost and all the materials needed. He would reject many of Bramante's initial designs and ideas, however he remained motivated to complete his vision until they finally came to an agreement. Their interaction demonstrated how influential patrons could be in shaping artistic style or content:

The Complex of St. Peter's is not the work of a single architect or even a result of a single building campaign; rather it grew out of various circumstances that were founded on a continuous belief in the sanctity and power of the site.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the upheaval of working with three different architects, Julius II remained steadfast in his civic duty of rebuilding the crumbling monument. Not only did Pope Julius II honor St. Peter and the Catholic Church by constructing the monument but enlarged the Basilica to become a massive necropolis where two hundred and fifty-six former popes are laid to rest, including Pope Sixtus IV and Pope Julius II. It still stands in Rome as a shining achievement worthy of awe and reverence.

## **Family**

Not to be outdone by the reigning Papal State, the ruling families of the Italian Renaissance also took part in glorifying their city with works of art. Families that were already wealthy and powerful looked to political patronage to elevate their status while supporting the arts. Some names of famous families are still affiliated with the Renaissance today; the Medicis from Florence, the Sforzas from Milan,

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<sup>5</sup> Charles B. McClendon, "The History of the Site of St. Peter's Basilica, Rome," *Perspecta* 25 (1989): 32-65.

Montefeltro from Urbino, and the Gonzaga from Mantua. Their goal of contributing to society led to beautifying chapels, grand altarpieces, and wall tombs for their families.

The Medici family was responsible for the majority of Florence's Renaissance art. Their prosperity started in the woolen cloth industry, moved into the banking industry, and eventually they became tax collectors for the Pope. Cosimo de' Medici commissioned Michelozzo di Bartolomeo to build the Palazzo Medici, Palazzo Medici Riccardi, to reflect his wealth and prestige. Concerned with sumptuary laws that affected how much wealth could be displayed, Cosimo instructed Michelozzo to keep the exterior of the Palazzo simple but allowed him to be more ostentatious inside the home. Michelozzo did not disappoint; he included traditional Roman elements in the design of the exterior that featured costly rare and beautiful rusticated blocks. "Even the construction of an imposing family palace, if done with taste, would improve the appearance of the city and so could be presented as a generous act."<sup>6</sup> The realization and completion of the Palazzo Medici by Michelozzo was an innovative feat that resulted in a rise in his status as an architect.

Another head of the family Lorenzo de' Medici, as an artist himself, had a personal interest in supporting the arts. He continued the family tradition of artistic patronage by bringing a young Michelangelo Buonarroti into his home to be tutored along with his own children. Numerous patronages are attributed to Lorenzo but he also was known to use his wealth to empower himself while keeping control of the city of Florence. He issued loans to a variety of men causing them to become indebted, including city officials. This economic prosperity enabled him to maintain his social status, yielding political power and control of the government while making him the de facto ruler of Florence. The Medici family's success fostered palpable jealousy from other ruling families and became targets for assassination. "The Pazzi Conspiracy, as it became to be known, was to involve assassinating Lorenzo and his younger brother Guiliano during Mass in the cathedral on Sunday 26, 1478."<sup>7</sup> Lorenzo was able to escape the assassination attempt with minor injuries, but his brother Guiliano was killed. Two banking families, the Pazzis' and Salviatis' were the

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<sup>6</sup> Richard Stemp, *The Secret Language of the Renaissance* (London: Duncan Baird Publishers, 2006), 198.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 82.

masterminds behind the crime and plot to unseat the Medicis. Pope Sixtus IV, who was also an enemy of Lorenzo's family, was rumored to be behind the conspiracy as well.

Patronage was the motivation for many of the ruling families to attain hierarchy and position, not unlike a King. Even though they were limited to the highest rank of Duke or Marquis, this was not a deterrent from patronizing the arts. The Sforza family of Milan became great contributors to the arts even when it was considered a blatant sign of their unparalleled wealth. Ludovico Sforza, the Duke of Milan, commissioned Leonardo da Vinci, the artist referred to as the “Original Renaissance Man,” because of his vast diverse talent. Leonardo had requested employment from Sforza by writing him a letter touting his many achievements. “Oddly, perhaps, painting and sculpture come last in the list of ten things - the preceding nine are all military projects, including a portable bridge, battering rams, and exploding shells.”<sup>8</sup> Sforza wanted to remodel the monastery Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan into a family mausoleum. He commissioned Leonardo to do a painting of the Sforza coat of arms and had him paint the Sforza family as new figures in a previously painted work by Giovanni Donato da Montorfano. Leonardo went on to produce the iconic image on the monastery dining hall; the world-famous depiction of Jesus Christ breaking bread with his twelve apostles in “Last Supper.” The large, fifteen by twenty-nine-foot mural stretches across an entire wall and continues to impress visitors despite technical problems that plague the painting centuries later:

Instead of using conventional fresco technique, Leonardo applied tempera over dry rather than moist plaster, and the result is the ruin that we see today, since the pigment did not bind with the surface beneath and quickly began to flake off. Yet, despite this technical incompetence, the grandeur of the conception cannot be denied; nor does the painting's mystique show any sign of diminishing.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Stemp, *The Secret Language of the Renaissance*, pg. 192

<sup>9</sup> Christopher Masters, *Renaissance* (Merrell, London, 2008), 100.

Federigo da Montefeltro, the Duke of Urbino commissioned Piero della Francesca to do two portraits, one of himself and one of his wife, the Duchess, Battista Sforza. The diptych paintings were said to be double-sided with a portrait of each sitter in a different setting on the reverse side. At first, it would not seem to be a painting flouting the wealth and prosperity of the Duke and Duchess until the examination of their dress. Battista is wearing expensive jewelry around her neck as well as in her hair, the sleeves of her dress are gold brocade and Federigo is wearing very expensive red fabric usually restricted to the ruling class. Battista's portrait was painted posthumously following her death after childbirth. The double portrait seems to reflect both Federigo's mourning and the realization that even wealth cannot insulate anyone from death.

The Gonzagas, the dynastic family of Mantua, were great art patrons who used their wealth to secure power through marriage, decorate and embellish their city for a century. They went beyond the visual arts by also commissioning many literary and musical works. Ludovico III employed Andrea Mantegna of Padua to be his court artist, a position he would hold for three decades. During the expansive ruling time of the Gonzaga family, the city of Mantua was well known as art, culture, and musical hub. Their family's deep-rooted artistic contribution to the city enabled it to become a candidate to be declared by the United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, UNESCO, as a World Heritage Site. Gonzaga aimed to evoke a feeling of court life in his home with Mantegna's impressive mural on the North Wall of Palazzo Ducale. The Gonzaga family were represented as they saw themselves, in a station above all others. Ludovico Gonzaga's efforts to glorify his family's name were captured for posterity in art. He commissioned Mantegna to decorate his bedroom and audience chamber with scenes of life at the Gonzaga court.<sup>10</sup> Ludivico and his wife, Barbara of Brandenburg, are seated in the scene, their five children are represented as well as his favorite dog, Rubino. A dwarf, who was their lady in waiting, was also included.

## **Guilds**

Guilds were established during the Renaissance by male tradesmen who banded together to teach as masters to apprentices who learned and practiced a given

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<sup>10</sup> Stemp, *The Secret Language of the Renaissance*, p.191

trade. There were seven major guilds, five middle guilds, and nine minor guilds in the city of Florence alone. They worked amongst themselves to establish fair trade and universal quality control. Only members of a guild were allowed to work within a city, vote, or hold political office. The guilds would settle disputes amongst members and clients and, when it came time, supported the dependents of deceased members. Guilds were important as major public patrons and were crucial to the professional development of artists. Various guilds frequently worked together on civic projects and eventually took over the maintenance of religious buildings:

This benevolence extended to the patronage of important buildings; for example, in Florence, the wool guild was responsible for the building and decoration of the cathedral, while the cloth importers' and refiners' guild patronized the Baptistery.<sup>11</sup>

The patronage involvement of the guilds is usually centered on exterior public places such as town squares and the construction of municipal buildings. Requests for the inclusion of particular contemporary people were not warranted or allowed. Although buildings do not evoke the same feeling of wonder or connection a painting or sculpture does, the architects of the Renaissance imbued their structures with austere personalities. One of the most artistically collaborative structures built in Florence was by the Guild of Wool Merchants, named the Piazza del Duomo. Designed and built by Filippo Brunelleschi it is known for its spectacular features such as the inclusion of the cupola, known as the duomo. The bell tower adjacent to the cathedral was designed by Giotto di Bondone and decorated with figures by the sculptor Donato di Niccolò di Betto Bardi, or Donatello. The baptistery in front of the cathedral was originally built between 1059 and 1100 and was further elaborated on by installing bronze doors created by sculptor Lorenzo Ghiberti. Ghiberti won a competition established by the Guild of Cloth Importers to adorn the North door of the building and created the gilt relief bronze titled the "Sacrifice of Isaac."

His second commission for the East doors of the cathedral was a much larger and more ambitious creation named the "Gates of Paradise." Ghiberti created ten

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<sup>11</sup> Stemp, *The Secret Language of the Renaissance*, p.182

panels for the baptistry doors that appear three-dimensional due to his innovative use of perspective:

In contrast to the small reliefs, with Gothic frames, that Ghiberti had made for an earlier set of baptistry doors, the 'Gates of Paradise' were decorated with larger rectangular panels, which provided more space for complicated narratives"<sup>12</sup>

The humanistic imagery Ghiberti instilled in the panels was said to inspire Michelangelo almost a century later for his work on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. The Guild House of Orsanmichele was built on the former kitchen garden in the monastery of St. Michael in Florence. Originally a grain market where the municipality of Florence stored excess grain for times of famine, it was converted into a church with a chapel reserved for the trade guilds. Outside on the facade of the building, fourteen alcoves were created that needed adornment. The city instructed each guild to commission a statue of their patron saint to be placed in these spaces. The guilds looked to outdo each other and the competition to hire the best sculptor was fierce. The guilds involved were mainly the Medici e Speziali, doctors and apothecaries and the Maestri di Pietra e Legname, wood and stone workers. Guilds for linen weavers, peddlers, shoemakers, merchants, farriers, furriers, butchers, bankers, magistrates, and notaries all prominently contributed. There were fourteen sculptures produced by nine different sculptors, some completing more than one casting. Eleven were sculpted in stone and the three, commissioned by the wealthiest guilds, were in bronze.

### **Government**

The government of the five city-states was also involved with patronage and commissioning works of art for their citizens. The Florence City Council commissioned Michelangelo to sculpt "David," one of twelve commissioned carvings featuring the Old Testament. The sculptures were originally supposed to go on the roofline of the Duomo, but were instead placed in the Piazza della Signoria, the main square where the Palazzo Vecchio or City Hall was located. They were placed there

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<sup>12</sup> Masters, *Renaissance*, p. 240

to be enjoyed better by the masses. Traditionally, sculptures cast of the heroic David interpreted him after he slew Goliath. Michelangelo broke this convention by crafting David's figure with a sling and stone in hand preparing to conquer the giant. This stunning marble sculpture is still revered for its lifelike depiction of male anatomy as well as a treasure of the Florentine city-state.

The small democracy of Siena commissioned artist Ambrogio Lorenzetti to create a mural called the "Allegory of Good Government" in the mid 14th century for the building Palazzo Pubblico. The building, built in 1297, served as the seat of government. The fresco was created for the "Room of the Nine," a reference to elected members of the city council known as the "Council of Nine." An inscription below the fresco spells out what the council was supposed to exemplify, "Where this holy virtue (justice) rules, she induces the many souls of the citizens to unity, and they make the common good their lord."<sup>13</sup> Although Lorenzetti incorporated a single figure to express the description of good government, the rest of the mural has multiple figurative representations. The four virtues of prudence, fortitude, justice, and temperance, the three theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity as well as wisdom and peace were represented and all given their due diligence. Amidst the multiple illustrations is the portrayal of the metaphorical twins, Romulus and Remus as a nod to Siena's roots as a former colony of Rome.

If not for the social institution of patronage fostered during the Renaissance, the modern world would look very different today. Patrons became the catalyst for a cultural revolution that encouraged radical thinking. The patrons' benevolence significantly seeded advancements of the human mind in science, mathematics, and especially within the arts. They became governors to a transformation that moved beyond religious thinking and concentrated on the human mind. Creatives became a collective organism as inspiration spread rapidly amongst them in response to each new advancement. Patronized by both the Medici family and the Marchese del Monte, where would astronomer Galileo find the time to improve on an earlier innovated telescope? Without ample opportunity to do so, would his advancements radically change the notion of the "heavens" with his discovery of the machinations of the solar system? It took Michelangelo four years to finish the Sistine Chapel; an

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<sup>13</sup> Stemp, *The Secret Language of the Renaissance*, 180.

incredible visionary feat that borders on perfection with its anatomic and humanistic depictions of the human figure.

DaVinci's iconic image of the Vitruvian man transcended the ideas of proportion and mathematics of the human body. His painting of Mona Lisa captured the attention of the world over and reached the heights of obsession. The world accepts these concepts of innovation and takes them for granted. It stands that without the catalyst of the patrons fueling the Renaissance, the theories might have instead remained an idea without design or could have never been realized or come to fruition.

For the socially mobile, a touch of added propaganda and embellishment was sometimes added to elevate their station. Some may have been atoning for their sins, particularly those who handled money, for they did not want to be suspected of usury. Their efforts demonstrated many patrons as upstanding, ethical, and moral, but may have been an attempt at a smokescreen to conceal their true character. Patronage can also be viewed as the embodiment of charity becoming a long-lasting gift to civilization. In whichever way they got involved, the patrons certainly laid the foundation that the entire world continues to benefit from today. Patrons pioneered a situation that led to gaining experience and furthered the careers of many scientists, mathematicians, and the arts alike. There was certain notoriety for the creative being linked to a Pope, ruling family, guild, or even the government. The patron and artist connection went well beyond a simple contract, as they both became invested in a project and depended on one another. The patron gained notability and social standing and the artist gained credibility.

Patrons should be acknowledged for their monumental undertaking, despite the countless reasons behind the how and the why of their sponsorship. Not only did they raise the arts to new heights, but they also brought it out of seclusion and privilege and made it accessible to the masses. Instead of the observing images of the divine or supernatural, the common man was faced with the reality of their own likeness, and perhaps a better understanding of what makes them human.

