

Notable Historical Figures and Patronage

"Each of the arts whose office is to refine, purify, adorn, embellish and grace life is under the patronage of a muse, no god being found worthy to preside over them." Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882)

Patronage can easily be traced into the ancient world and also into the beginnings of feudal Japan. Wherever one looks within humanities' rich art history, the value of patronage is easily found and proudly acknowledged. At first glance, what appears to have been an enduring love of the arts may have had many other guises.

In the Renaissance, two views of patronage are seen. First, a wealthy family, often royal, ruling class, or aristocratic, invited an artist into their household, and the artist would often over the course of years provide the artistic needs of that patron. Art patronage provided good public relations within the community for the patron.

Second, an individual or an organization, often the church, employed an artist offering a commission for a single artistic work, and the arrangement lasted until the project was completed. One such memorable creation involved the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, and this work of Michelangelo was commissioned by Pope Julian II.

Artists quickly learned that their artistic career and upward mobility within local society depended entirely upon their involvement in a growing network of patronage relationships. Records abound linking all notable historic figures to the sources behind the funding of their day to day lives and thus their production of artistic creations.

Piety, prestige, and pleasure were the three motives most often attributed to patronage of the arts, and such values soon became institutionalized in the City of Florence. Mario Biagioli said that Florentine patronage was not a option, but the key to social status. In reality, the key was that artists needed patrons to do their work.

Few dispute Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) became a stereotypical "renaissance man," yet his fortunes always rested with the whims of a patron. He apprenticed at age 15 with Verrocchio, the renown painter and sculptor. His life involved a series of scientific and artistic occupations with quite notable patrons.

Da Vinci's creations include the most recognizable pieces of art, The Last Supper and the Mona Lisa, yet the list of other works is much longer. His list of patrons included City Rulers, Governors, Kings, and Popes.

Michelangelo (1475-1564) began a three year apprenticeship with Domenico Ghirlandaio at the age of 13. Later in his life, a controversy arose over his early training. Still, his life was filled with many commissions from generous patrons, and his accumulated body of artistic work is legendary.

At one point, he said, "One cannot live under pressure from patrons, let alone paint." At that time, local politics as well as the church brought many pressures to bear on the artists they supported. Michelangelo lived during the reigns of 13 popes, and he worked directly with seven of them acting as his patron.

William Shakespeare (1564-1616), renown English poet and playwright, lived in a time of sporadic plague outbreaks that closed all public theaters. During those times of theatrical and commercial crisis, he turned to patronage and earning income from his poetry.

Shakespeare, unlike other writers of his day, would not dedicate his work to noble women or seek their patronage. Instead, when he wrote *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, he dedicated them to a stylish young Earl of Southampton thus indicating some kind of patronage relationship existed between the two men.

Later in his years, Shakespeare prospered from his writing and as a land owner lived a comfortable life.

At the age of six, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791) toured the courts of Vienna and Munich and later Versailles. Although recognized as a child prodigy, he had difficulty getting patrons and at age 21 began working as church organist for the new archbishop.

Later, after hostilities with the archbishop, he was forced to confront the perils of a freelance existence. Soon afterwards he initiated a series of subscription concerts. Over his life, the limited patronage he received was unable to alleviate his growing financial hardship, and after 1789, his situation became critical.

This master of every musical form in which he worked was deeply in debt into the last years of his life. His last commission for a work he didn't finish was too little and too late to significantly improve his financial situation.

Acclaimed as the first Romantic composer, Ludwig Van Beethoven (1770-1827) lived his life on a grand and passionate scale. He moved to Vienna in 1792 and depended on the patronage of aristocratic admirers to survive. He dedicated many works to his wealthy friends.

In the early 1800s, he realized he was going deaf. His despair increased to the point he contemplated suicide, and to survive, he threw himself into his work. Eventually, his work suffered. It became more abstract and personal. Each score took longer to create, and they arrived more infrequently.

After 1814, his patrons provided him with a regular stipend so that the "necessities of life would not block his genius." In the last years of his life, he concentrated mostly exclusively on string quartets. Even today, composers struggle to understand his final vision of that musical form and its harmonics.

These are only five of the most notable artists. Ones that most people easily recognize. However, the complete list of historical artists who received patronage during their lifetime is exhaustive and includes most names we remember. That list also includes such notables as Raphael, Galileo, Emerson, and Monet.

Behind each of these artist's name and behind many others, there is a bigger story about patronage. Some are uplifting and seem to easily free our spirit, yet just as many others appear cruel, senseless, and heart-breaking. Historically, I guess one might conclude that patronage has worn two hats, one black and one white.

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