Patronage in the Renaissance

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Abstract

The patronage system of early modern Europe decided appointments to offices in church and state and was a dominant force in cultural life. Patronage started with the prince and spread downward through courtiers to their own circle of dependents. Grants, patents, offices, and financial rewards flowed through interlocking networks of personal relationships: patrons were often themselves intermediary figures, bestowing favors while at the same time serving as the clients of those higher in the hierarchy. So ubiquitous is patronage in the Renaissance world that the term has been stretched to embrace disparate practices. A patron might be an individual (monarch, prince, aristocrat, cardinal), a family, or a corporation (guild, monastery, confraternity, city council), with multiple overlap between these types. Acts of patronage cover arrangements from the nepotistic assignment of government contracts to the commissioning of altarpieces and the provision of time and opportunity for the exercise of scholarly labors. Motives and perceived benefits for the patron were varied. Instances of patronage in the cultural field range from a relatively simple contracted job to long-drawn-out personal relationships involving familial proximity, political allegiance, and binding customs such as ritual gift exchange.

The arrangements of patronage certainly influenced cultural production and social behavior. In order to win favor from their superiors, aspirants to patronage often emulated courtly manners, cultivating the appropriate fashions, tastes, and mannerisms. An artist or intellectual patronized by a court thereby obtained a certain status and a connection to peers, and these arrangements could flow back into the work. At the same time, a patron might be a useful bulwark behind which dangerous ideas could be explored (as in the case of Hobbes; Sarasohn 1999). Writers sought individual patrons to reward their works, and patrons gained prestige through association with virtuosic artistic and intellectual achievements. Works of art and books took on significance as material objects, signifying the qualities of their owner and signaling subtle messages of power and prestige. Patrons may have operated for their own political interests, but could equally exercise taste and discernment, taking a part in the creative process itself. Through patronage, philosophy remained closely tied to civic and political life; even if desired, the ivory tower removed from worldly activity was rarely available to the Renaissance philosopher.
Heritage and Rupture with the Tradition

Renaissance patronage inherited an older tradition, locked into feudal relations. Wealth and power were personally invested in great families and individuals, who distributed to clients. Patronage could operate at several removes: a local dignitary might put in a word on a client’s behalf with someone low in the court, who could pass the request to someone higher up and so on. Political life was perceived as a pattern of social relationships. A client applied for a post or favor through personal networks, while a patron could accumulate personal and political capital through sponsoring work of a high quality. In the Middle Ages, the chief sources of patronage were the court and the church (which might operate through multiple agents, such as monastic houses and eminent individuals). With the rise of cities and the city state, other sponsors such as guilds and merchant bankers of the popolo grosso families took on a role as patrons of art and scholarship (Asch and Birke 1991; Cooper 1996).

Innovation and Original Aspects

The nature of the patron’s role and the motivations behind it were shaped by a number of cultural forces. Civic humanism encouraged the contribution by the wealthy and powerful to public service and the common good. The active exercise of virtue – which included patronage – was praised over the idea of inherited nobility. The concept of magnificenza, the generosity of spirit and action first praised by Plato as a quality of the philosopher king, was taken to include the financing of great works of art and architecture: this was praised as a virtue by Leon Battista Alberti (De re aedificatoria, 1443–52) and analyzed by the Neapolitan humanist Giovanni Pontano (De magnificentia, 1498). Courtesy books like Castiglione’s Il cortegiano (1508–28) endorsed the picture of the cultivated noble, skilled in appreciation of the arts. Church strictures against usury have been related to patronage of religious art perceived as an act of piety. Motives need not have been entirely self-interested and may frequently have been mixed: a commission may be at once an act of piety, civic philanthropy, and political self-advertisement. Renaissance patronage offered scope for the patron to exhibit connoisseurship and is related to the rising status of the artist and writer (Constantinidou 2010; Gilbert 1998).

Patronage could range from the commission of a single work to client living in his patron’s household and thus taking on a certain social status with the lifestyle to match. The Florentine Medici, as well as being patrons of the visual arts, present a notable example of a great family with interests in philosophy, working in the spirit of humanist revival of the colloquies of antiquity. Cosimo de Medici founded the Platonic Academy, led by Marsilio Ficino. Lorenzo de Medici sponsored Ficino’s translations of Plato from Greek into Latin and was patron to Pico della Mirandola. The gatherings at the Medici court brought philosophers, poets, and artists close together, encouraging a symbiosis of image and idea, expressed, for example, in the allegorical paintings of Botticelli (Kent and Simons 1987). Such associations provided a model for other countries (Knecht 2008). The variety of patron-client relations make generalizations difficult, and the subject has been most fruitfully approached at a microhistorical level: case studies of intellectuals and their patrons include work on Machiavelli (Landon 2013); the Valori family and their relation to Savonarola, Ficino, and Machiavelli (Jurdjevic 2008); Galileo and the political networks of Rome (Biagioli 1993); and the relations of Thomas Hobbes and William Cavendish, the Earl of Newcastle (Sarasohn 1999). Detailed studies have also been made of the shaping of literary careers and expression in the period (Lytle and Orgel 1982).

Some general points may, however, be ventured. One is the trace left in the language and form of written productions. Verbally, the habits of deference and supplication created a language based on the terms of love and friendship. Dedicatorial epistles are characterized by effusive flattery and a claim to intimacy that may not have existed; thus the Petrarchanism of the sixteenth century, with its codes of adoration and humility,
provided a useful rhetoric for systems of patronage. These codes could be misunderstood at the time and are hard to interpret today. Cultural products like books were presented as gifts, and were reciprocated with material objects, or posts such as tutor and household secretary. A book was both ornament and commodity. Writers without their own means were dependent on patrons for a livelihood; without copyright, even books with a relatively large readership generated little income. Since philosophy seldom operates successfully in the open market, some form of sponsorship and patronage has always been necessary for its production. In later centuries this has more usually been the corporate university rather than the single individual. But the role of benefactor, the successful individual as patron of the arts and learning, remains today and owes much to Renaissance precedent.

References

Secondary Literature


