



Who Shaped the Renaissance? — The Path of Artistic Revival from the Perspective of Patrons' Social Roles

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Abstract — During the Renaissance, literary and artistic creation reached its peak level, fostering literature and artists represented by Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo and others, and creating classic works that will be remembered for generations to come. However, the works of this period could not have achieved such splendour without the contribution of patrons. These patrons provided funding and shelter for artists, so many artists travelled to Rome to exchange ideas and produce a large number of works of art, while patrons were able to enhance their political status and increase their social influence through patronage. Together they propelled the Renaissance to greatness. Taking the Renaissance as the research background, this paper takes patrons as the research object. Firstly, according to the social status of patrons in this period, they are classified into three categories, the church, the nobility and the guilds. Secondly, the psychological activities of the patrons and their potential purposes and motives are analysed through specific examples of patronage. Finally, the influences that patrons brought to literary and artistic works are explored. This paper aims to reveal the central role of the patronage system in the cultural ecology of the Renaissance and to provide a new perspective for understanding the interaction between art and social structures.

Keywords — European Renaissance, Patrons, Artists, Medici Family



I. INTRODUCTION

During the Renaissance, literary and artistic creation reached its peak level, fostering literature and artists represented by Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo and others, and creating classic works that will be remembered for generations to come. However, the works of this period could not have achieved such splendour without the contribution of patrons.

There were three general types of patronage of the arts in the Renaissance: religious patronage, royal or noble patronage, and guild patronage. The nobility was the most important patrons, and the Pope, who was above the royal family, also assumed the role of patrons. In addition, during the Renaissance, the social classes in Europe changed, with the rise of the middle class represented by wealthy merchants. The spread of scientific knowledge and the development of university education nurtured not only aristocratic families but also many children of merchants, and as an emerging force their ideas were full of humanism.

For example, they became the main group of people who paid to see plays at the theatre and supported the operation of the theatre. This was to some extent a form of patronage. On the other hand, their values also had a significant impact on literary works, and in order to gain more income, writers had to make adjustments to cater for the values of a wider range of people when creating their works. Therefore, all these patrons of different class composition provided patronage for the development of literary arts. Although the Christian Church, headed by the Pope, remained an extremely important force for art patronage, the palaces, numerous wealthy families and citizens throughout the Western world were all involved in art patronage at the time for their own purposes and motives. Through the study of the classification of art patrons, we are not only able to understand the motives and purposes of the patrons, their choice of objects, and the influence of the content and form of their patronage, but more importantly, we are also able to see the differences and distinctions between the different types of patrons.

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1.1 Research Questions

Taking the Renaissance as the research background, this paper takes patrons as the research object. Firstly, according to the social status of patrons in this period, they are classified into three categories, the church, the nobility and the guilds. Secondly, the psychological activities of the patrons and their potential purposes and motives are analysed through specific examples of patronage. Finally, the influences that patrons brought to literary and artistic works are explored. On this basis, the paper seeks to explore the following research questions:

- Q1: Which are the patronage patterns in the Renaissance?
- Q2: What are the psychological motivations of the patrons?
- Q3: What are the influences of patrons on the Renaissance?

1.2 Literature Review

In recent years, academic experts and scholars have achieved relatively good results in the study of patronage. Some researchers have discussed Italian, English, and French patronage in literature, theatre, and the fine arts during the Renaissance, tracing the situation of patronage before the Renaissance (Bartlett, 1983). Peter Burke analyses the systems of patronage that emerged in Renaissance society and divides them into five: the family patronage system; the made-to-measure patronage system; the market system; the academy system; and the grant system (Stieber & Burke, 1989). The British art historian Gombrich details the reasons for the Medici family's patronage of the arts and its influence on Renaissance artworks in his masterpiece *The Early Medici Family as Patrons of the Arts* (Gombrich, 2000). In summary, the academic research for Renaissance patrons is more comprehensive and in-depth, and these research results provide reference for the writing of this paper.

From practical point of view, although the development of arts funding has gone through a long evolution, especially in the West has established a relatively perfect arts funding system. However, the survival of artists today is still in jeopardy. *The Situation of Berlin Artists and the Gender Gap*, published by the Institute for Strategic Development (IFSE) and the Berlin Visual Artists' Association (bbk berlin), reveals that 90% of artists are unable to rely on their pensions in their later years; 80% of artists are unable to afford their studio rents; and only 10% are able to earn their full annual income from their artworks (Wöbken, 2018).

According to the report, these figures are not only a reflection of the current situation of artists in Berlin, Germany, but also a true reflection of the current situation of artists around the world. In this way, the study of the history of patronage can provide historical insights into the development of contemporary literature and art.

The topics about the Renaissance have always been the key research issues in European history. For a long time, research on the Renaissance has mostly taken artists and their works as the main object of study, and patrons also contributed to the development of the Renaissance, so the significance of patrons cannot be ignored. Current academics usually only examine art patronage as a social factor influencing artists' creation. Researchers have mostly focused on specific artists and styles of work. However, the social structure of the entire West, including Italy, had changed dramatically during the Renaissance, and patrons were no longer a single concept. According to the socio-economic conditions of the Renaissance, art patrons can be analysed in categories. Art patrons or organisations not only showed obvious differences in their motives and subject matter, but also in their choice of objects, as well as their influence on the form or style of works of art. Thus, with the unique perspective of patrons, this paper aims to explore in depth the relationship between patrons and art creation, which can lead to a deeper understanding of the development of culture, society and art at that time. Through historical documents, the psychological motives of early patrons are restored to help us understand the direction of literary and artistic development.

II. PATRONAGE PATTERNS AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF LITERARY ARTS

Patronage is an important work in cultural and artistic activities, which refers to the giving of a certain amount of money, facilities and services by individuals, organisations or the government to help the development of cultural undertakings. Patronage usually includes poetry, sculpture, painting, music, theatre and so on. The main body of patronage consists mainly of religious groups, monarchs, aristocrats and other privileged classes at the top of social power. They were the patrons of the arts and the enjoyers of the arts. Patrons employ and feed art creators, collect and buy art works, and provide art creators with livelihood security. Arts funding is the power system that supports the development of the arts.

2.1 Religious Groups Represented by the Popes

Under the impact of the Renaissance wave, the popes showed an enlightened interest in the scholarly explorations of the humanists and became great patrons of the arts. Cardinals built lavish residences for themselves, while at

the same time they invested heavily in painting and sculpture. Monasteries and churches became the preferred objects of papal artistic patronage in the 15th century. Through his influence on society, the popes directly intervened or potentially guided on a variety of levels, from artistic technique to artistic themes. Artists had to follow instructions in order to gain a career. For example, Pope Urban VIII brought ecclesiastical art patronage to its peak. He made the Baroque artist Gianlorenzo Bernini an "imperial painter" by placing him in the Vatican under near-exclusive artistic patronage for 21 years (Verstegen, 2007). Bernini created the famous *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*, the tomb of Urban VIII, the bronze canopy of the altar of St. Peter's in the Vatican, and other important buildings at the request of the Pope. Pope Sixtus IV was also a devoted patron of the arts, and it is estimated that the total number of paintings and buildings he sponsored during his reign was the highest of any pope in the 15th century (Verstegen, 2007).

While the popes were the largest and most important patrons of religious groups, churches and monasteries everywhere also hired famous artists to decorate these buildings. For example, the monastery of St Mark, now in Florence, employed Fra Angelico, c., a famous painter of the time, to paint frescoes for the rooms of the monks. Also Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper* was a wet fresco for the dining room of the Convent of Maria in Milan.

2.2 Royal Patronage Represented by the Medici Family

During the Renaissance, the Royal patronage of the arts was mostly in the form of issued edicts, palace performances and paintings. Theatre troupes were often sponsored by the crown to stage plays at court, and theatre performances thus became part of court culture (Sandoz, 1982). In the 15th century, the Medici family ruled all of Florence for 60 years, so this paper uses the Medici family as an example. For the Medici family, their patronage was not only for the love of art and the appreciation of artists, but also for political demands, and through this patronage of the arts, they gained public attention and support. The patronage of the Medici family can be seen in their different aesthetics, but all for the same political purpose, indirectly influencing the art style of Florence in this period.

The family's first patron was Giovanni di Bicci de' Medici, who opened the Medici Bank, giving the Medici family the financial strength to secure future patronage of literature and the arts. He patronised Masaccio, whose masterpiece was *The Holy Trinity*, famous for its outstanding architectural background, a milestone in humanism, and whose success also helped to increase the influence of the Medici family in society at the time (Zhao, 2023). Cosimo di Giovanni de' Medici was the son of Giovanni di Bicci de'

Medici. Unlike his father, he preferred the field of architecture, and the engineer Filippo Brunelleschi was patronised by him. Filippo Brunelleschi's masterpiece was the dome of the Basilica di Santa Maria del Fiore. This event became the turning point for the Medici family to cross over from merchants into the aristocracy. Another important patron of the Medici family was Lorenzo de' Medici. He was born at the height of the Italian Renaissance. He patronised artists such as Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo and Raffaello Sanzio da Urbino and also founded schools. Sandro Botticelli was one of the leading figures of Renaissance fine art, and Lorenzo de' Medici invited Botticelli to live in the Medici Palace so that he could concentrate on his work without worrying about food, clothing, or shelter. Botticelli created *The Adoration of the Magi* based on the Medici family. In the centre of the picture was the Virgin Mary with the Holy Child on her lap, and in the picture were Lorenzo and Botticelli. Such a painting that includes the Saint, the Medici family and the painter himself is very unique. The painting was initially placed in the St Mary's Basilica in Florence, which gives an indication of its status and importance. Botticelli and his patron, Lorenzo de Medici, both had an unlimited love of art and together they contributed to the artistic development of the Renaissance. Michelangelo's *Portrait of Giuliano de' Medici, Duke of Nemours* was modelled on Lorenzo's son. Raffaello Sanzio da Urbino also produced many works through Lorenzo's patronage, such as *The School of Athens*. He also painted a portrait of Lorenzo de' Medici, which was auctioned in London in 2007 for 230 million yuan (Liu, 2013).

2.3 Patronage by Guilds

The patterns of arts patronage changed as a result of capitalism in embryo. The artist community is restless in the decline of the old model of patronage and free in the new model of funding (Wright et al., 1983). Guild patronage was formed a little later than the first two patterns and came with the seeds of capitalism. During the Renaissance, merchants had an undisputed position in the economy, but religion was still the dominant ideology in society. The thousands of years of church control over people's thinking could not be changed overnight, so merchants were still at a very low social status. However, as the guilds grew and money was used to build municipal projects in the cities, the power of the guilds gradually rose from economic to political social attributes.

The guilds used art patronage to build their identity. In Florence, for example, the wool guild was one of the richest of the 21 guilds at the time. In the fifteenth century, the guilds' most common patronage were donations and decorations to churches and hospitals. The construction of the Cattedrale di Santa Maria del Fiore lasted two long

centuries (1294-1467) and most of the costs were borne by the wool merchants' guilds.

III. PSYCHOLOGICAL MOTIVATIONS OF THE PATRONS

Tracing the motives of patrons for art sponsorship, there are some differences in the motives and purposes of sponsorship due to different identities of patrons. Art forms, develops and dies out based on a wide range of social and cultural scenarios. Therefore, when studying art patronage, we should not only consider the personal interests of the patrons, but also pay attention to the social and cultural context of the time. From a historical perspective and social aspect, we should examine the art works formed by art creators based on artistic traditions and social pressures as well as the profound impact of art patronage. The religious ideology of the Middle Ages has always strictly limited the creative spirit of artists. During the Renaissance, the development of art patronage was the first to break the religious constraints on art, and the individual style of artists was widely recognised and appreciated. As rulers and important patrons of the arts at the time, the Medici family promoted the development of Florentine culture (Yu et al., 2019). The motives of the royal family for art patronage, represented by the Medici family, can be broadly divided into two categories, firstly, out of the inner drive, i.e., the belief in God in their hearts and the pleasure that works of art brought them; and secondly, out of the external drive, i.e., the ruler's political needs (Yu et al., 2019).

In terms of politics, the intention of religious groups to invest for political purposes is very obvious. For example, Pope Julius II, in order to re-establish the prestige of the Holy See in the Christian world, made a great effort to build a large number of outstanding architects and sculptors gathered in Rome. The royal family also invested for political purposes. The Medici family started out in the banking industry and gradually gained political status, but they expanded their economic power by lending money, an act that was not recognised in society at the time, so the Medici family resorted to humanism to seek recognition of their wealth, often using art to conduct social activities.

In terms of psychological salvation, as the way of accumulating wealth conflicts with Christianity, building monasteries or embodying devotion to God in works of art becomes a form of self-compassion or salvation for the patrons. For example, Cosimo was a devout Christian from the beginning, but his wealth led to a strong religious antipathy. Wishing to find a balance between his religious devotion and his desire for wealth, Cosimo, tormented by illness, appointed Michelangelo to design and build the Convento di San Marco for the salvation of his soul.

City Guilds sponsorship has a distinctly different purpose than the other two types of sponsors. Most of the city guilds' art patronage was for profit. In terms of hobbies, religious rulers and aristocratic patrons also fulfilled their love of art and their role as status symbols to a certain extent by hiring good artists to serve them. They used art as a show-off tool for status and wealth. It is also for the purpose of showing off that patrons often chose the more famous or outstanding artists for their patronage.

IV. THE INFLUENCES OF PATRONS

4.1 The Influence of Patrons on Artistic Style

These types of patronage showed slight differences in artistic style and subject matter. The style of art patronage represented by the guilds was more in line with the trend of the times, catering to the aesthetics of the public, and for profit with little personal interest. The supremacy of papal power can be felt in the patronage of art represented by the Pope. Every work of art sponsored by the Pope manifested the Pope's political intentions and personal preferences. In the patronage of art represented by the princes and nobles, the personal interest was more obvious, and the themes and styles were more diversified, not only limited to paintings and sculptures, but also monuments, coins and so on. At the same time, these works were also a manifestation of power and glory, and therefore extremely luxurious.

4.2 The Positive Influence of Patrons on Literary and Artistic Works During the Renaissance

During the Renaissance, art patronage helped artists get rid of their status as craftsmen and provided creative space, which greatly promoted the overall development of Western art. The prevalence of art patronage allowed more and more people to enter the field of art, and many talented artists were discovered, bringing a steady stream of development to the art world. On the one hand, if an artist accepts a commission from a patron, after the work is completed, his reputation will continue to be mentioned in high society along with the existence of the artwork. This allowed patrons to receive constant commissions from the upper classes and to quickly become famous and wealthy. On the other hand, the patrons in the Renaissance were also thinking rational connoisseurs with a deep understanding of both science and aesthetics, willing to encourage the complexity of imagery creation that inspired artists to innovate. For example, Leonardo da Vinci applied scientific knowledge to painting, optics, maths and perspective, with a passion for mechanical engineering, which led to the creation of the *Trattato della pittura* causing quite a stir at the time. There was also Filippo Brunelleschi who even discovered the principle of perspective.

4.3 The Negative Influence of Patrons During the Renaissance

Although patrons have promoted the development of literature and art, we have to admit the objective fact that patrons' control over the content and subject matter of art has deprived literature and art of free space and brought about certain negative effects. Before the rise of modernism, artistic creation was never meant to express the artist's personal feelings, but often embodied the wishes and aesthetic interests of the patrons. Therefore, the British art historian Gombrich believes that until the 15th century art works were the works of patrons (Gombrich, 1994).

As Renaissance artists enjoyed the opportunities afforded by patrons, they also inevitably embraced the downsides of these patronages. Most artists, at a young age, entered the guilds to learn. Beginning as apprentices, orders from employers were distributed to various workshops for processing, and apprentices helped their masters fulfil these orders while learning the craft under them. Apprentices are expected to fulfil a large number of orders each day, and the artistic style needs to conform to the employer's requirements. At this time, the artist's creativity was directly restricted by the patron's status, aesthetics, and preferences, and the artist's freedom of creativity was constrained through the signing of a contract. It can therefore be said that the works of art were the works of the patrons. We can imagine that without the patronage of the Medici family, the Renaissance would have been different from what it was today. The audience had too much power over the choice of plays, so that the playwrights deliberately catered to their tastes, resulting in the plays becoming more and more commercialised, abandoning academic reflection on reality, and depriving these plays, paintings, sculptures, and buildings of their original depth of thought.

V. CONCLUSION

From the church and the royal family to the guilds, such a patronage network was formed from the upper classes of the rulers to the general public. Through sorting out the patterns of art patronage, it is not difficult to find that the relationship behind art patronage actually embodies a kind of power relationship. The patrons hold the right to speak and take the initiative through capital, information and their own power. However, the creators of art need to rely on the help of the patrons to realise the transformation of value. Patrons support the creative activities of artists for different purposes, and in order to obtain sponsorship, artists create works according to the requirements of patrons. Artists' creative activities were influenced by patrons in terms of subject matter, content, and colours, so patrons had a role to play in influencing the direction of art development. But it

is also because of the support of the art patrons, which helped the artists to tide over the difficulties and had a good environment for the creation of art. Western art was able to advance steadily. To sum up, art patrons in the process of art development has played a very important promotional role, precisely because of the existence of the patrons, so that art grows stronger.

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